The boundary-less classroom: extending social innovation and impact learning to the field

Jill Kickul
Berkley Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation, NYU Stern School of Business, New York, New York, USA
Mark Griffiths
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA, and
Sophie Bacq
Center for Research in Entrepreneurial Change and Innovative Strategies, Louvain School of Management, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain, Belgium

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how extending social innovation and impact learning to the field was accomplished.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper discusses how experiential learning can be adapted to social entrepreneurship education and how to structure the course and deliverables. It highlights the importance of students’ selection and preparation.

Findings – The paper shares some students’ reflections on their fieldwork and how they dealt with new ideas. It also provides three central lessons – “go real”, “go deep”, “get feedback” – that were learned through the experience.

Research limitations/implications – Since information from only one course offering has been reported, a simple generalization should be made cautiously. For this reason, the transferability of this experiential learning course to other regions of the world is discussed and recommendations are offered for educators who want to engage in a successful “boundary-less classroom.”

Originality/value – Initial evidence is provided that the success of experiential learning in social innovation and impact can be guaranteed by a number of elements, including students’ preparation to assist them as they confront challenges found in the field experience. Experiential learning would not be transferable without deep intercultural understanding and a well-chosen selection of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs with whom to collaborate.

Keywords Social environment, Experiential learning, Innovation

Paper type Case study

Introduction
For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them (Aristotle)

As one of the leading schools in business education, New York University’s Stern School of Business is at the forefront of modern educational techniques. To raise the profile of the school’s social innovation and impact specialization, the decision was
made to offer a course that ran over two semesters and through a two-week winter break where students would consult with innovative social entrepreneurship-focused companies throughout India. This innovative program was part of a new experiential learning course entitled “International social impact strategies” (ISIS). The team-based projects focused on areas including micro-entrepreneurship, renewable energy, microfinance/cooperative farming, family planning, fellowship development, and health services. The teams interacted directly with senior leaders of the partnering organizations, and gained exposure to every facet of their operations. Whether working directly alongside ambulatory emergency pickups, advising farmers on innovative ways to incorporate renewable energy in their operations, or setting up meetings with the largest corporations in India to discuss sustainability, students’ fieldwork resulted in experiences that could not be replicated in a classroom.

In this paper, we demonstrate how we managed to extend social innovation and impact learning to the field. First, we discuss how experiential learning can be adapted to social entrepreneurship education and how it can explain the success of the ISIS course. Second, we introduce ISIS and the course structure and deliverables. Third, we highlight the importance of students’ selection and preparation. Fourth, we share some students’ reflections on their fieldwork and how they dealt with new ideas. Fifth, we develop three central lessons – “go real”, “go deep”, “get feedback” – that we learned through our experience. Finally, before delivering some concluding comments, we discuss the transferability of the ISIS course to other regions of the world and offer recommendations for educators who want to engage in a successful “boundary-less classroom.”

1. Discussion on experiential learning
Experiential learning is the process of accumulating knowledge through direct experience (Kolb, 1984; Itin, 1999) and focuses on the learning process for individuals. Experiential learning theory has been used in both management and entrepreneurship studies. For instance, the benefits of experiential learning have been put forward on tacit knowledge processing (Holcomb et al., 2009; Kayes, 2002), where it has been shown that tacit knowledge is one factor that distinguishes successful managers from others (Armstrong and Mahmud, 2008). Experiential learning has also been shown to provide advantages in terms of opportunity recognition in entrepreneurship situations (Corbett, 2005). Shane (2000) demonstrated, through case studies of entrepreneurs, that such opportunities are discovered related to the entrepreneur’s prior knowledge. Entrepreneurial learning as an experiential process has further been conceptualized by Politis (2005) where the entrepreneur’s career experiences (start-up experience, management experience, industry-related experience) are transformed into entrepreneurial knowledge, in line with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory. Since experiential learning can be described as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), Politis (2005) considers entrepreneurial knowledge as the result of the combination of both gathering and transforming experience.

1.1 Experiential learning as an education method
One common example of experiential learning at the university level is going on an industry site visit to an organization and learning through observation and interaction.
with the operational environment, as opposed to reading about the process in a book. The objective is to make discoveries and experiments with knowledge firsthand, instead of hearing or reading about the experiences from a second or third-hand perspective.

Experiential learning technically does not require an instructor since it concentrates on the meaning-making process of the individual’s direct experience. However, though the gaining of knowledge is a process that occurs naturally, for a genuine learning experience to occur, there must exist certain key elements. According to David Kolb (see Merriam et al., 2007), knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences. Further, he states that, to gain genuine knowledge from an experience, certain abilities are required:

- the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience;
- the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience;
- the learner must possess decision-making and problem-solving skills to use the new ideas gained from the experience; and
- the learner must be able to reflect on the experience.

Experiential learning can be a highly effective educational method especially for adults as it engages the learner at a more personal level by addressing the needs and wants of the individual. The process requires qualities such as self-initiative and self-evaluation. To be effective, it should employ the whole learning wheel, from goal setting, to experimenting and observing, to reviewing, and finally action planning. This complete process allows for the learning of new skills, new attitudes and even new ways of thinking. An example of this model in relation to the ISIS course is presented in Figure 1.

1.2 Experiential learning in entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship education

Grounded in the fact that entrepreneurial knowledge is tacit and difficult to transfer into traditional classrooms, experiential learning has been incorporated in many entrepreneurship education programs and used in many different forms (Solomon et al., 2007).
including consultancy with practicing entrepreneurs (Solomon et al., 2002), and field trips (Klatt, 1988, in Kuratko, 2005). In social entrepreneurship education, “one way to incorporate an experiential component... is to organize social enterprise consulting projects for groups of interested students, where students are required to act as consultants to a new social venture” (Tracey and Phillips, 2007, p. 269). Benefits of such consultancy projects are numerous including direct experience with a social venture and new insights into social impact consultancy. Moreover, students are led to use their prior knowledge on social innovation and impact.

Experiential learning can be seen as consisting of two elements: prior knowledge and the processes used to acquire, assimilate, and organize new knowledge (Holcomb et al., 2009). Therefore, designing a social entrepreneurship course should be based at least, on a preparation exercise, followed by a field experience. The former enables students to have a strong theoretical basis on social entrepreneurship related concepts, while the latter requires going into the field and experimenting with the previously learned knowledge to gain new perspectives from practical experience. In the case of social entrepreneurship education, the preparation exercise includes concepts and theories and is all the more crucial given the complexity of social entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, the hybrid and ambiguous nature of social entrepreneurship-focused companies characterized by a double or triple bottom line implies that innovative social entrepreneurs have to manage the challenges usually linked to entrepreneurial activity, while striving to achieve social outcomes.

Evidence of the importance of experiential learning in social entrepreneurship education has been reported by Brock and Steiner (2009) through the analysis of 107 social entrepreneurship syllabi in the USA and abroad. They found that “seventy-five percent of faculty teaching social entrepreneurship are assigning service/experiential learning projects to give students hands-on experience, with a significant portion of the overall course grade attributed to the project (approximately 30%)” (Brock and Steiner, 2009, p. 17). This finding reinforces our confidence in experiential learning as an educational method well suited for social innovation and impact learning.

2. First steps

Conceptualized by the student-run Social Enterprise Association (SEA) a few of years ago, the ISIS class was initiated under the academic leadership of Professor Jill Kickul, Director of the Stewart Satter Program in Social Entrepreneurship, Indian-born Professor R. Kabaliswaran, and Graduate Assistant Sanjay Rupani. Through a partnership with Hans Taparia, Director of Preferred Brands International, a ready-to-eat Indian food company, the team developed relationships with innovative social enterprises such as the Deshpande Foundation, and deepened NYU’s existing relationship with the Acumen Fund. Through the various partnerships six separate “clients” were identified who were willing to host the student consulting teams.

The course’s goal is to provide a socially relevant academic experience that combines classroom curriculum with hands-on learning in an international setting. The course is designed to help students gain in-depth insights into economic and social value creation in the developing world. Students learn to think strategically and act opportunistically with a socially-conscious business mindset. Through their fieldwork in India, students gain exposure to a partnering firm’s innovative model for addressing
respective issues, as well as to other stakeholders in the field (customers, suppliers, government) to provide an additional lens and perspective into the complexity of making scalable progress in implementing new solutions. Student teams’ work with the firms to deliver on discrete projects designed to meet existing needs. In addition, project deliverables facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practices within the sector.

3. Finding and preparing the students

3.1 Student selection

Students were selected along the following criteria:

- Course-relevant previous education (e.g. courses in social impact and innovation, sustainability, social entrepreneurship, non-profit management and markets, etc.).
- Course-relevant work experience in social sector or related (e.g. type of experience in sector as well as any consulting/management-project based work. Some vertical domain experience in areas such as education, agriculture, entrepreneurship, infrastructure or city development, water, etc. would be a plus).
- Course-relevant interest and motivation in fulfilling their own educational goals and career development in the social sector.
- Work experience in a developing country (e.g. this need not be NGO experience, but students who had worked in a developing nation would also be able to hit the ground running).
- Perceived team leadership qualities, including previous leadership experience in course/extracurricular projects, work/consulting projects, ability to lead and motivate others.

The Appendix contains the application form used. The students were not limited to those from the Stern School of Business. Several students were accepted from the Wagner School of Public Service and the Steinhardt School of Education. Every effort was made to have integrated teams by having students self-select to consulting clients of greatest interest to them.

To help prepare students for their projects, the ISIS course provided case studies on Indian social enterprises, and lectures and classroom dialogue on cultural, political, and social topics. Further, through the use of Skype, student teams were introduced to their Indian partners while still in the USA. This initial contact was used to identify the basic parameters and scope of the individual consulting projects. Industry experts were invited to provide one-on-one advisory sessions for each team. Students then had the opportunity to do initial research in an attempt to “hit the ground running”. This proved to be reasonably successful as, shortly after the return to the USA, Taparia stated “It is rare to see a group of students hit the ground running in a new country and add value so quickly. The ISIS students brought a unique blend of expertise, out-of-the-box thinking and global exposure to their projects. While final project proposals have yet to be submitted, the mutual value addition between the students and the partner organizations has clearly been substantial”.

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3.2. Possessing the skill set

To ensure that students were making adequate progress and were aware of the various skills they would need to master before arriving in country, the following deliverables (as specified in the syllabus) were required:

1. **Problem definition memorandum.** After the first teleconference with the client, each team must develop a problem definition memorandum of up to three pages in which students define and justify the problem(s) or opportunities that they think their team should address in their client work, as presently understood. It should include the information on:
   - organization history and background;
   - current status, including organization's strengths and weaknesses;
   - future goals: short-term (one to two years) and long-term (three to five years);
   - objectives: problems or opportunities that the client would like the team to study; and
   - financial performance, where data are available.

2. **Letter of agreement.** Each team must develop a letter of agreement to document the proposed scope of work of the consulting project. The letter of agreement should include:
   - summary of problem definition;
   - project objectives (to the extent possible, these objectives should be expressed as expected outputs, preferably outcomes rather than activities);
   - key research question(s), proposed analysis to answer each question, and the data required for this analysis;
   - proposed approach/methodology (major activities and timeline);
   - brief description of the intended content and format of the deliverable(s);
   - expectations from communications between the student team and the key client contacts (e.g. designated points of contact, frequency and method of contact prior to arrival on site, frequency and nature of contact while in country, etc.);
   - projected resource requirements (e.g. understandings about access to people and information, handling of expenses, availability of logistics support from the client, etc.); and
   - summary of the work experience and relevant skills of each team member (approximately one paragraph each), to demonstrate the qualifications of the team.

The revised version of this document, incorporating client feedback on the draft version, should also include a work plan with greater detail on the major activities and timeline for both the US-based portion and the on-site portion of the project. The work plan should also clearly note the analyses, literature reviews, studies of best practices, etc., that will be conducted by individual team members:
Project status reports. These reports, submitted twice, must include an update on each team’s progress to date, any adjustments to the scope of work (e.g. changes to the original problem statement, objectives, key research questions, or major activities), and a review of the project against key factors of risk and success.

On-site work plan. Teams must submit a detailed work plan for the on-site portion of the field study and indicate which meetings, interviews, or other activities have already been scheduled and confirmed, and those that are not yet scheduled.

Presentation of findings and proposed recommendations and detailed outline of final report.

Final report.

Presentation of final Report highlighting key findings, major recommendations & implementation plan.

The culmination of the team’s consulting work was reflected in the final report and presentation. After presenting their final deliverables and recommendations for their respective Indian social enterprise, students also discussed major challenges, lessons learned in the field, and final course reflections.

4. Student reflections

4.1 Challenges and lessons

Many students remarked on the fact that working with a nascent social enterprise, operating in a different country opened their eyes to how the fundamental issues of business are the same everywhere. However, being in a foreign environment made it easier to strip away the “non-essential” parts of the business, bringing the fundamental to the fore:

For example, listening to the management and team members, it was the lack of strategic focus was immediately apparent. Along the same lines, the communications channels of management to the rest of the team were also weak, and resulted in the exact situations seen in cases from school. Team members wasted time and resources on leads, clients and projects that will not ultimately drive the firm to success.

Many students had only worked in well-established corporations with significant resources and did not have a true appreciation for the challenges that entrepreneurs face. Working with a group that started a business from scratch really showed how difficult it can be to develop effective strategies and business processes if a business background is lacking:

I thought the bulk of my learning in business school would occur in the classroom, and that it would be enough to establish a strong degree of confidence in general business subject matters. Until I actually embarked upon our particular financial analysis project, I still had doubts about what I had learned. But once we started, and especially once we were on the ground, it finally occurred to me that indeed I had internalized the finance and accounting material after all. Sometimes it’s difficult at Stern because people interested in finance are typically going into the banking industry, and so it’s easy to forget that there are multiple layers of finance and that indeed non-profits and social enterprises need assistance in this
area. It is likely that I would have come to this realization post-graduation, after working for a few months, but I found it a blessing to uncover this level of confidence while still in school.

Despite classes in team building and communication, many commented on the importance of communicating effectively when working across cultures. Learning how best to use communication technology, how to compensate for differences in communication styles, and how to develop trust from the other side of the world has taught students not only how to communicate with teams from other countries, but also how to be a better communicator in general:

I learned that customs, attitudes, infrastructure, business processes, and approaches to problem solving are all very different from what I'm used to, and I'm very thankful to have developed a toolkit for effectively addressing these differences.

4.2 Using new ideas

The biggest challenge faced by most student groups was that despite the initial preparations, the clients were not ready to fully commit to the project until the student groups were in situ. The experience of the NextGen (a renewable energy company) team was typical:

The biggest problem was the lack of focus of NextGen and its inability to manage expectations. The CEO did not set aside time to meet with us, and, aside from professors and the Minister of New & Renewable Energy, none of our third party meetings were set up by NextGen.

We addressed this in three ways. First, we adjusted our expectations on deliverables from NextGen. While we asked for financials (and were promised) several times, we have yet to receive them. As we realized what we could expect from NextGen, we worked to change our deliverables to them and manage the process to that what we were working on was as much in our control as possible. Second, our team did a lot of independent outreach to competitors, potential customers and agencies to set our own agenda. This outreach resulted in several meetings, all of which have added value to our deliverable to NextGen. Finally, we addressed this issue directly with the CEO, laying out that he needs to be accountable to his customers and to people he is working with.

In the case of the Deshpande Foundation – Family Planning Association, the team collaborated with a Deshpande Foundation’s Fellow to conduct financial analysis for a business plan for the Family Planning Association of India’s Dharwad branch (FPAI). FPAI provides both free and paid reproductive health services throughout India. However, the NGO’s subsidies are decreasing, and the issue was how to make the branch self-sustainable by funding its operations through its mix of paid services for above and below-poverty-line customers. The team had the opportunity to contribute to a new business model that would be an example not only to all other FPAI branches, but also would be transferable to similar organizations in India:

One of the greatest learning aspects of this project was working in a small town in a foreign country. The workday didn’t start until 10 a.m., internet access was spotty, and the power went out at least twice a day, so we learned how to be very efficient with the time that we had to work. Overall, these experiences enabled us not only to apply some of the class concepts to the real world, but also stimulated personal growth though an understanding of how to work in a completely different culture.
Generally, each client organization had good things to say about the students although initially, they were skeptical about how much value students could really add in only two weeks. Not only did they find the students to be insightful and innovative, they are now excited about providing more opportunities for students to continue to expand on their work. That is, the clients wanted to continue the consultancy relationship with future ISIS classes.

5. Lessons learned: faculty reflections

There were several lessons learned from a faculty perspective that relate to the design, learning development, and implementation of such a course. These are based on themes that will be integrated into the next version of the course, including:

- “Get real” – instead of a three-month ramp-up time before the trip, only four to five targeted sessions would be necessary to prepare the students to “hit the ground running” in India. Thus, more time in the second half of course would be used to fully develop their project deliverables. In some ways, being there with partners, meeting suppliers, customers, government is just the beginning in understanding our partners’ business, scope of project, developing trust, etc. that is needed to meet client goals. Students can come back and have more time to complete their analysis, compare notes and further research best practices specific to their client needs and observations.

- “Go deep” – students need to be better prepared for their sectors. During the ramp up and post trip, students need to be exposed to sector-specific cases and examples. Preparation is crucial for the course and student learning. Indeed, a team working on microfinance/co-op farming needs to be exposed to models, perspectives from around the world that apply directly to the Indian context and region of project. Successful social entrepreneurs should also be invited to speak about their experience in social venture creation and the challenges they faced. Finally, more time focused on country specific background (conducting business in India, political, socio-economic, cultural information) would benefit student preparation.

- “Get feedback” – our partners can give additional useful information on how the skills and experiences of the students match their needs and the project scope. Two of the teams did not have students who had the prerequisite skills to complete the partner’s needs. One constructive suggestion would be to adopt (beyond the standard application form) a student interview. Also, having potential partners complete an application form would be beneficial in identifying the scope of the project and in matching student skill sets. The more data and information one has early on will help select teams and give students further data and disclosure of their partners, project scope and deliverables.

6. Transferability to other regions

The ISIS course and its design/structure could be transferred to other regions of the world, such as Africa, or South America, if some adaptations are created with the program. Indeed, business practices in developing countries are often idiosyncratic depending on the country’s history, culture, religion and economic development. Familiarization with the country and the partnering social enterprises is mandatory.
prior to the trip. Particular attention should be given to the timing of visit (i.e. is it a period of religious or secular holiday?), the reliability and commitment of the contact persons (i.e. how were these persons found or recruited?) in the foreign country. Consulting with Indian, African, or Latin American social enterprises requires a multi-dimensional understanding and appreciation of the foreign nation’s culture and business practices. Understanding cultural differences and adapting to them is one of the key success factors of such an education program. However, building intercultural trust relationships aside, the social enterprises’ characteristics and their motivation to build a sustainable enterprise that has a positive social impact are several of the common denominators to the program’s success, independent of the region chosen.

7. Concluding thoughts
In this paper, we have shown how experiential learning or the transformation of prior knowledge through direct experience with a social innovation and impact focus is well suited to engage students in how they can be active participants in providing an additional lens and valuable solutions at a social enterprise level. Within the ISIS framework, students initially learn the complex concepts of social innovation and social impact, before confronting their knowledge with real field experience through consultancy projects with social entrepreneurs of developing countries. Students have the opportunity to reflect on what they experienced from collaborating with the social entrepreneurs and complement their knowledge on the topic with their field-based observations. The success of experiential learning in social innovation and impact can be guaranteed by a number of elements, including students’ preparation to assist them as they confront challenges found in the field experience. Experiential learning would not be transferable without deep intercultural understanding and a well-chosen selection of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs with whom to collaborate.

Although continual improvements can be made, we hope to encourage educators in social entrepreneurship to create and implement similar programs with social enterprises in other developing countries. In doing so, we have the opportunity to engage, inspire, and develop the next generation of social entrepreneurs that have the potential to use their social focus with their business acumen to influence progress and change within the communities they serve.

References


Further reading

Appendix. Application for International Social Impact Strategies (ISIS) course

Brief overview
NYU Stern is set to launch its second International Social Impact Strategies (ISIS) in the fall semester of 2010. ISIS is intended to provide a socially relevant academic experience that combines classroom curriculum with hands-on learning in an international setting. The course is designed to help students gain in-depth insights into economic and social value creation in the developing world. Through case studies, lectures and classroom dialogue, students will learn to think strategically and act opportunistically with a socially-conscious business mindset.

Through an innovative partnership with firms located in India, students will have the opportunity to apply their classroom learning to real-world issues by conducting fieldwork abroad. Team-based projects will focus on areas including poverty alleviation, energy, health and sustainability. Students will gain exposure to the firm’s innovative model for addressing issues of global poverty, as well as to thoroughly-vetted international social enterprises that are making tangible and potentially scalable progress in serving the world’s poorest populations. Student teams will work with the firms to deliver on discrete projects designed to meet existing needs. In addition, project deliverables will facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practices with the sector.
Because the class is capped at 24 students, we are asking all interested students to formally apply. Selection for the class will be based on your overall interest, motivation, experience, and background in business and/or the social sector.

Application for ISIS course

1. Name:
2. E-mail:
3. NYU School (e.g., Stern, Wagner, Law, etc):
4. Describe your main interest/motivation in taking the ISIS course. Max 200 words.
5. Describe your previous background and experience in the business and/or social sector that you would bring to the classroom and fieldwork with an India social enterprise. Max 300 words.
6. Describe what you hope to gain in taking such a course (i.e. what key learnings and career-related perspectives would you like to have achieved at the end of the course?). Max 300 words.
7. Overall, why should you be selected to participate in this course? Max 200 words.
8. Field work in India is a required part of this course. If admitted, are you sure you can make the time-commitment for field work in India during Jan 3-14, 2011?

Send the above along with a one-page résumé. E-mail to: jkickul@stern.nyu.edu

Corresponding author
Jill Kickul can be contacted at: jkickul@stern.nyu.edu

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