

Bridging Academia and Industry: A Strategic Approach to Training in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Integrating guest speakers into higher education classrooms poses challenges in aligning their presentations with students' and faculty's academic goals and expectations. Drawing on experiential learning theory, this study used feedback from a semester of speakers to propose a framework for effectively coaching both speakers and students to enhance learning outcomes. The framework enhances learning by guiding speakers to focus on training students through compelling presentations that align with course objectives while also promoting interactive student engagement to strengthen comprehension and skills. Findings after implementing the framework from this study highlight the critical role of strategic preparation in maximizing the effectiveness of classroom training sessions. This framework strengthens career readiness by cultivating professionalism, communication skills, and essential workplace competencies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Clearly explaining academic concepts while also demonstrating their real-world applications can be challenging for faculty in higher education. Inviting professionals to be guest speakers in the classroom is a great way to connect academic knowledge with how it applies in industry. Unfortunately, sometimes, the goals of the instructor and the goals of the guest speaker may not be aligned. For example, many professionals who hire recent graduates volunteer to speak in the classroom simply to create opportunities to promote their organization and hire the best and brightest.

Business faculty often seek ways to enrich students' learning experiences and deepen their understanding of course material, while guest speakers often aim to promote jobs and recruit top talent. Professionals may volunteer to speak but may not have valuable content to share or may overshare worst-case scenarios, so faculty may have to do an impromptu shift of the conversation. As a result, there can be a misalignment between the topics company representatives wish to cover and the expectations of faculty and students.

Although these challenges exist, bringing guest speakers into the classroom offers many benefits. According to The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) interpretive guidelines for accreditation, modern and impactful business curricula should

include experiential learning opportunities to connect academic learning with professional experiences (AACSB, 2021). Inviting professionals into the classroom provides an avenue to experiential learning and facilitates this connection between the academic and professional worlds. Speakers describe the real-world application of the concepts being covered in class. They also expose students to careers and industries they were unaware of and provide a realistic picture of a typical career path and experiences within a role or industry. Speakers can share stories and examples that make concepts more tangible for students. In most cases, engagement with speakers in the classroom helps build students' skills and, ultimately, their employability.

However, as mentioned earlier, a guest speaker may simply deliver a recruitment pitch for their organization without proper guidance before their presentation. Even worse, the talk might lack engagement, fail to provide clear explanations or miss the opportunity to equip students with valuable skills for their future careers.

Therefore, we propose shifting the perspective from guest speakers to trainers. When a speaker is invited to train students, it opens up numerous ways to engage with students that benefit all parties involved. This paper will include: (1) a literature review of experiential learning to provide the study's rationale, (2) an overview of the



study, (3) a framework for effectiveness when incorporating speakers into the curriculum, and (4) a discussion of outcomes after implementing this shift from speaker to trainer.

2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Experiential learning theory has been used in education for many years as it can be a transformational learning experience for students (Kolb, 1984). The main focus of experiential learning includes learning through direct experience and reflecting on the experience. It encourages learners to explore, experiment, and make connections between theory and practice. As mentioned above, the AACSB encourages experiential learning activities as it drives the hands-on learning process for students (Lister, 2024, May 28).

Experiential learning activities might include team-building exercises, simulations, projects, internships, and guest speakers (Baden & Parkes, 2013). Incorporating guest speakers into the classroom has been one experiential learning method used for many years to connect course lecture materials to real-world situations. Guest speakers provide students with diverse perspectives and practical insights outside traditional lectures. Speakers can also give examples of their experiences, which can add depth to theoretical concepts being discussed in class.

Being able to effectively equip students with skills that make them employable can be a challenging task (Bhatti et al., 2023). However, as employment is the end goal for most graduates, developing relevant skills and building pathways to future employment is crucial. Incorporating diverse speakers from various industries creates an environment where different career paths are explored, including those students that have not previously considered or knew existed. In addition, speakers create in-class networking experiences for students. These interactions with class speakers can include opportunities to apply for internships and jobs.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers researched and developed career competencies as a foundation to prepare students for the workforce (NACE, 2024). Career and self-development, communication, and professionalism are some of the important competencies identified. Career and self-development allow students to navigate career opportunities and networking to build relationships within and outside one's organization. Communication relates to being able to exchange ideas and perspectives with others effectively. Professionalism allows students to interact with others while maintaining a positive personal brand. Creating an environment where students can develop these career competencies in the university setting can be challenging. However, incorporating effective, engaging speakers into the curriculum creates an opportunity to cultivate these competencies. As students hear firsthand descriptions of career journeys, they better understand the need for and the practical application of career and self-development. As students ask questions and interact with speakers, they witness professionalism and communication in action. When speakers are strategically incorporated into the curriculum and well-prepared,

they help build these competencies in ways that feel organic and seamless to the course content.

Furthermore, Obi et al. (2022) studied the experiential learning activities of business students that most contributed to developing communication, collaboration, and critical thinking competencies. The findings support that business educators should devote a "substantial portion" of curriculum development to strengthening partnerships between schools and industries to create avenues for business education students at all levels to apply their knowledge in real-life situations.

In addition to demonstrating the effects of speakers in broadening students' competencies and perspectives, Perius (2024) found that incorporating speakers into the business curricula assisted business faculty in remaining current with industry trends and workforce development needs. Perius further concluded that speakers can assist instructors in modifying and enhancing course content to ensure students are well-prepared to meet future employers' expectations.

3. METHOD

This exploratory study was conducted in an upper-level marketing course at a mid-sized regional university in the southern United States, which included juniors and seniors. Ten speakers from various industries were incorporated into the class throughout the semester. Students were surveyed after the speakers' presentations.

3.1. Pretest Student Feedback on Speakers

The following feedback was given in an open-ended survey section related to the ten guest speakers invited to speak in the classroom. The speakers were not given any guidance on their presentations.

- *Talked way too fast about boring, technical details. I lost interest and got a horrible headache from the presentation.*
- *I also wished they went more in-depth with what they do as a company instead of just the positions they are hiring for.*
- *I feel that a lot of what their PowerPoint contained is the information we already learned in the lecture that they read to us.*
- *She did not seem very passionate about the company and did not effectively show us real-world situations.*
- *It was difficult. She didn't seem that enthused about the job or company. Maybe she is chill, but I wasn't that excited to work for the company based on the presenter/presentation. I felt like she only talked about positions they wanted to hire for and not useful information.*
- *Not very informative when you think of real-world experience.*
- *Did not seem invested in talking with students, only AT us.*
- *Maybe he could talk about an average day at the job or situations they face and not try to convince us to work for them.*
- *I wasn't the biggest fan of this presentation. I felt as if it wasn't informative.*

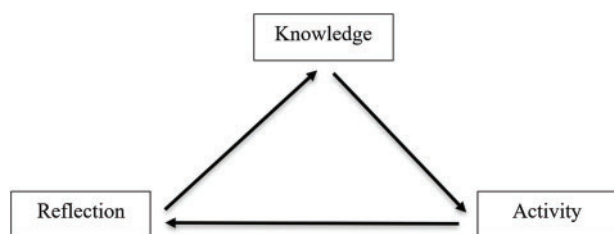


Fig. 1. Framework for training effectiveness.

Based on the constructive feedback from students and experience from faculty and students from different business areas, a new framework for effectiveness was developed to guide speakers and reposition them as trainers with the right tools for success.

Fig. 1 shows the Framework for Training Effectiveness, guided by components of experiential learning theory through 1.) Knowledge, 2.) Activity, and 3.) Reflection.

Knowledge in this setting refers to information the students acquire through lectures and textbooks before the trainers come to class. Knowledge will also be developed through pre-session research on the professional, their company, and the industry. This information prepares the student and professional before the activity takes place.

Activity involves applying knowledge in real-world settings. During the speaker sessions, students can actively engage and learn with the trainers. Professionals will be able to train students effectively through an organized process. A framework for the training session will set clear expectations and maximize potential outcomes. Without a framework for guidance, it is easy for someone, including an expert with many years of experience, to go down a rabbit hole to share information.

Storytelling has been used in many contexts over the years as an effective way to engage with others. Giving speakers a narrative framework for their stories or case study examples will allow students to follow the presentation more easily and better remember relevant content (e.g., Escalas, 2007). Activities during these sessions could also include applying concepts discussed to a case for students' discussion.

Reflection, in this case, takes place after engaging in the activities. Students can synthesize their knowledge and experiences. This allows them to identify patterns and insights. Through this process, new knowledge is created, and understanding is deepened.

4. A FRAMEWORK FOR TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS: STEPS TO PREPARE THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINERS

4.1. Knowledge Steps

Potential speakers' knowledge level and openness to guidance and suggestions on their presentation must be assessed before extending an invitation into the classroom, even if they are experts with many years of experience. Once invited, explain to the professionals that their role in the classroom is to train the students in the same manner that they would train their employees.

Before the training day, give a time frame for the training presentation to set expectations from the beginning. Give

them a frame of reference by clearly explaining the topic being covered in the classroom when the speaker is presenting. For example, in a Professional Sales class, one topic is building rapport with potential customers. Therefore, the guidance would be, "Can you train students like you would train new sales professionals on how to build rapport, including examples?"

4.2. Activity Steps

Suggest the format for their training session with recommended timing (Example):

- Start with a story on their journey to their current role (2–3 minutes)
- Brief overview of the company (2–3 minutes)
- Specific topic/focus for the training (15 minutes)
- Activity focused on the topic (15 minutes) **If the expert is struggling to come up with an activity, suggest an alternative for questions and giveaways*
- Discuss learnings from the activity / key takeaways (5 minutes)
- Questions (10 minutes)

Slides should include minimal words, bullet points to give guidance, and questions to ask students to engage on the topic.

Suggest a storytelling framework to help them think through their stories and case studies. Examples can also give them an appropriate frame of reference.

Suggest and/or help brainstorm a potential activity to engage and practice what they have learned on the topic. For example, have students get in pairs to ask a few open-ended questions, then develop a way to build rapport with them to keep them interested in having a conversation. The activity does not have to be boring. It could be in the form of a game with prizes or company swag.

End the training with potential career paths and company/industry information once the students have engaged with the expert.

4.3. Reflection Steps

Ask students to complete a survey at the end of the training to get feedback, including key takeaways, to share with the professional. This could include their interest in the profession/industry to share their information with the company.

Provide a way for students to connect with the professional following their visit (via email address, phone number, LinkedIn profile, etc.).

4.4. Steps to Prepare the Students

In addition to preparing speakers to ensure the best learning outcomes, students must also be prepared for engagement with the guests.

1.) Knowledge Steps:

Before the training day, **share a bio and have students research the professional and their company**. One way to do this is to have them research them on the company's website and social media accounts. The expert likely has a LinkedIn profile that could give interesting information about them and their company.

Identify questions to ask in advance. This allows students to be prepared and confident in asking their questions. A few example questions can also guide them in how to ask professional questions. Having them submit questions beforehand also allows for suggestions on improving the quality of the discussion.

2.) Activity Steps:

Share expectations for professional etiquette and respectful behavior during sessions. Dressing professionally could also be a part of this expectation. **Encourage taking notes** during presentations to show active listening skills. Future assignments or tests could incorporate information from the sessions.

Remind students to ask questions during the training sessions. Faculty may also need to be prepared to devise questions from the expert/speaker's presentation and tie the speaker's answers to topics that have been covered or will be covered in a future class period.

3.) Reflection Steps:

After the session, **have students complete a survey** to give feedback on the training. It is also important to have students discuss key takeaways that tie directly to the course content during the reflection. Use the information shared with students during the training session to include in future assignments and tests that make connections.

Encourage students to connect and follow up with the professionals. This may be in the form of a card or email to thank them for their training session. This also creates an opportunity for students interested in internships or job opportunities to show interest in their organization.

4.5. Post-Survey Results

The next year, after putting together the framework and giving guidance to the ten speakers (positioned as trainers) and students, six speakers were the same as the previous year, and four were new speakers. The following feedback was shared through a survey to gain insight into the effectiveness after the trainers were given the guidance:

- *She presented very well and kept it interesting and engaging, all while being educational and resourceful for what we were learning in class.*
- *The presenters were very insightful and gave great advice on how to be better in their role.*
- *I enjoyed hearing about the processes used at their company.*
- *I learned new things I didn't know, and the presenters were very insightful and helpful to me in my future career and life in general.*
- *She knew what she was talking about and was prepared to speak to college students.*
- *I enjoyed hearing from a business owner's perspective and hearing about his habits and mindset. It showed me that everyone starts from ground zero, and I felt as if it prepared me for the real world.*
- *The speaker was real, emotional, and encouraging throughout the entire presentation. What he said was good preparation for going into my future career.*
- *He was good! I liked how he had a lot of interaction.*
- *I like how they want to help us understand their specific processes, which leads to better long-term outcomes.*

- *It was very interesting to hear the story of how they could went from nothing to climbing the ladder and being successful at their company.*

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This exploratory study showed support for positive outcomes when speakers and students are coached on creating an engaging classroom experience. When a speaker's perspective shifts from speaking about their company and positions available to a mindset where they are training students to be successful, they are more open to listening and learning from their guidance. Since this was an exploratory study, future research could test the validity of the results.

Even with a small sample size, this study gave insight into an important area for higher education faculty wanting to bridge academia and industry. Based on the positive results, faculty can give guidance and even incorporate a checklist that gives professionals insight into an ideal classroom experience. Not only is it essential to ensure that the faculty member is prepared, but also to prepare the speakers and students. Prior studies have shown that having students complete some pre-work assignments before presentations can significantly impact learning outcomes (Dalakas, 2016). Being transparent and adding in the preparation element for the professionals sets the expectation for how to be successful.

While preparing students for career readiness can be difficult, there are ways to engage students with professionals that can be effective. Instead of wasting students' and professionals' time on potentially ineffective presentations, this study indicates that it is imperative to be strategic in coaching both parties to have engagement in the classroom that leads to positive outcomes. By achieving experiential learning outcomes, (Lu, 2021) students will be better prepared to navigate the professional world, and the trainer professionals will have a better chance of gaining trust to hire these future professionals.

Focusing on career and self-development while in college, for example, through training sessions like those described in this study, can enhance their employability by making them more competitive candidates in the job market. Engaging in these activities can help students clarify their interests and make informed decisions about their future careers. Personal growth and self-awareness are invaluable in navigating challenges and thriving professionally. Participating in events where professionals engage with students also builds confidence for participating in networking events and expanding their network.

Guiding the trainers and students on professionalism will also build valuable skills, such as being prepared for meetings and interacting with others. Concise communication is essential for collaborating with colleagues and conveying ideas. They may have to pitch ideas to leaders in their organization one day or lead meetings. Being able to convey information persuasively can influence decision-makers and achieve desired results. Learning to be professional and communicate effectively in college equips students with essential, transferable skills that will be used in various situations, thus enhancing their employability,

career advancement opportunities, and overall success in the workforce.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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