

Teaching Sales Course in a Higher Learning Institution: Learning by Doing

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Abstract

It is an ultimate learning experience to be able to bridge theory and real-world practice in sales class. Nonetheless, it is a challenge for educators in higher learning institutions to incorporate practical aspects into teaching. In response, this study was conducted to expose students to perform selling in a real-life situation. 42 students enrolled in a professional selling course in a higher learning institution in Malaysia were given a selling task. The students were asked to promote a financial product (i.e., insurance) to a potential client under the supervision of an insurance agent. The task given to the students was part of the course assessment and carried out throughout a semester. Students' perceptions of the benefit gained from performing selling in the real sales environment were obtained through student evaluations at the end of the course. This study indicated that the students had a positive selling experience, and the selling activities aided students' understanding and interest in the course.

Keywords:

Experiential Learning, Financial Product, Insurance, Sales Course, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Employers demand graduates to be better prepared for the workplace (Docherty, 2014). However, the 2017 Hays Asia Salary Guide reveals that 97 percent of employers in Malaysia are struggling to find the skilled individuals they need (The Star Online, 2017). In particular, 24 percent of Malaysia's employers found that the most difficult professionals to recruit are sales. A great salesperson can assess customer needs and motivations, analyze and forecast market trends, use sophisticated automation tools, and develop value-driven solutions in partnership with clients (Fogel, Hoffmesiter, Rocco, & Strunk, 2012).

Sales course is commonly offered in many universities. However, it is a challenge for educators to incorporate the practical aspect of sales subject into teaching. According to Drea, Singh, and Engelland (1997), traditional teaching methods such as lectures, textbook assignments, and readings have focused on passive learning, introducing students to a basic understanding of the content and providing minimal skill development. Dewey (1915) claimed that real-world practice was crucial for achieving a long-lasting understanding of the subject matter. Despite that, achieving this in a typical university course is challenging. According to Corbett, Kezim, & Stewart (2010), selling is a complicated and difficult process; hence, the

active learning experience approach is beneficial and an effective instructional technique. In addition, Fogel, Hoffmesiter, Rocco, and Strunk (2012) suggested that the best way to launch a new sales education program seems to be to partner with the industry.

This paper presents an alternative way of teaching sales course in a higher learning institution in Malaysia that requires students to practice selling in a real environment under the supervision of a real salesperson. The remaining part of the paper is presented as follows. First, a discussion on a teaching sales course in higher learning institutions is presented. It is followed by an explanation of the sales project given to students. Then, students' feedback on the project is presented in the results and discussion section. Finally, the conclusion section is provided at the end of this paper.

TEACHING SALES COURSE IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Sales courses are frequently included in the business program curriculum in higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Professional selling or sales management courses are examples of common sales courses offered in any business program. Sales education is behavioral, not merely conceptual (Spiller, Kim, & Aitken, 2019). Nevertheless, several studies have shown a gap between what is taught in classrooms versus what is needed to be successful in the professional world (Leisen, Tippins, & Lilly, 2004; Schlee & Harich, 2010). In particular, employers expected graduates to have the knowledge and skills required for that particular job.

In Malaysia, employers generally perceived that graduates failed to meet the market expectation and recommended that higher learning institutions enhance their curriculum to equip and create industry preferred and relevant graduates (Seetha, 2014). Abdullah (2018) argued that the main reason for the graduates' employability issue is the failure of transferring the classroom learning to the job in the industry. The failure could be contributed to teachers' teaching styles. A study conducted by Shaari, Yusoff, Ghazali, Osman and Dzahir (2014) found that the majority of the lecturers use a personal model of teaching style whereby teachers tend to act as a prototype to students on how to think and behave. Similar findings were found in schools where most Malaysian teachers preferred to practice personal model of teaching styles (Yusof, Vyapuri, Jalil, Mansor, & Noor, 2017). Additionally, Hudin, Osman, Shokory, and Wahid (2018) added that it is still a common practice that lecturers rather than students become central to teaching in learning. Hence, it is challenging to teach sales courses that require students to apply the selling concepts to practice if the learning process does not involve students' participation.

In teaching sales, few strategies for integrating sales theories with practical experience have been used. Learning by doing or also known as experiential learning, is widely used in teaching sales courses. In experiential learning, students immerse in an experience and then encourage reflection about the experience to develop new skills, attitudes, or ways of thinking (Lewis & William, 1994). The process follows the four stages of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2018), which starts with experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Studies have shown that if the learning experience is perceived positively, students are more likely to engage in the learning experience (Lewis and William, 1994). In another study, Drea, Singh, and Engelland (1997) concluded that experiential learning increased business skills for students.

Educators teaching sales courses have created and shared exercises that emphasized the customer-centered focus of the sales field today (Rippé, 2016). Practical exercises in sales classes will assist students in developing a variety of selling skills. A common experiential learning technique used in sales classes to enhance specific selling skills is role-playing (Kolb & Kolb, 2018; Moncrief & Shipp, 1994). In role-plays, students assume the roles of buyers and sellers and interact in a realistic way. The typical sales role-plays would require the student assuming seller's role and introduce himself as well as making a sales presentation. Then, the student assuming buyer's role would consider the offer presented or gives objections. The seller will handle the objection and try to make an offer to the buyer. After managing the objection, the buyer purchase the product and both buyer and seller feel relieved and happy. Finally, the class instructor will allocate some time for debriefing once the role-play is finished.

Although role-plays have been found as one of the most effective ways to engage students, and the application of role-playing will initiate and maintain learning (Baruch, 2006), they lack realism (Moncrief & Shipp, 1994). For instance, students do not know the feeling of anxiety when presenting in front of a stranger or the unknown response from the prospect when they approach them for the first time. Students may also not be seriously involved in the role-playing activity, and only joke around or have a chat with each other instead of preparing for the role-play. Furthermore, Rippé (2015) argued that students do not experience the pressure to meet a quota or difficulty in time management to accomplish certain objectives when performing role-plays.

While the main drawback in role-plays is lack of realism, to create the role-plays more realistic, Moncrief and Shipp (1994) suggested adding a specific buyer personality and selling situation. Other than that, Widmier, Low, and Selden (2007) suggested role-play competition instead of ordinary role-play to be considered in teaching sales. Role-play competition will avoid boredom among students after watching numerous role-plays in which they did not participate (McBane & Knowles, 1994). Widmier, Low, and Selden (2007) further added that role-play competition intensifies not only the advantage of role-plays but also competition and teamwork. In another study, Johnson, Billups, and Poddar (2021) found that role-play competition also positively influences students' intent to pursue a sales career.

Other than role-playing, cases and computer simulations are also widely used. Faria (1998) reported that business simulation game was also used widely to provide active learning to apply knowledge to practice. Simulations are a very enriching part of the learning experience. According to Cook (2004), students learn higher-level skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and analytical thinking through simulations. Also, simulation experience increases student interest level in the course content (Cook & Swift, 2016).

Despite using role-plays, cases, and computer simulations in teaching sales courses, Fogel, Hoffmesiter, Rocco, and Strunk (2012) suggested that the best way to launch a new sales education program seems to partner with the industry. Bringing industry to the classroom enhances students' learning experience and will better understand the subject directly from practitioners. Torres and Rawal (2021) tested surreal play experience, a type of role-playing involving outsiders as buyers. They found this strategy positively impacted students' interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills, knowledge, and attitude toward sales. Therefore, to take advantage of industry involvement in sales course and experiential learning, in this study, students enrolled in professional selling course were given a selling task as part of their course assessment that not only allows them to assume the role of a salesperson but their sales projects were monitored by practitioners from industry.

METHODOLOGY

Performing selling task

In this study, year three students who enrolled in a professional selling course in a higher learning institution in Malaysia were given a group assignment that required them to promote a financial product (i.e., insurance) in a real selling environment. Promoting insurance was selected as the financial product in this group assignment because the students enrolled for this class were students from a marketing degree program specializing in financial services. The course instructor gave 14 weeks (equivalent to one semester) to the students to complete the task by applying all the selling processes learned in the class. At the beginning of the semester, students were briefed on the task and purpose of exposing students to perform the selling process in a real environment. Then, students were divided into eight groups of five to six students. Students were given lectures on the selling process to prepare themselves for the task. Each group has been assigned to an insurance agent from four different insurance operators in Malaysia to assist them in understanding the product and selling process. All insurance agents were volunteers to be part of the group assignment and acted as mentors to guide each group's assignment.

Selling task output

With the assistance of insurance agents, each group was asked to choose one insurance product, then understand the product offerings, followed by finding a potential client for that particular insurance product, and presenting the sales proposal to the potential client to close a sale. Students were also asked to deliver reports in stages throughout the semester as an output. In the first stage, each group was required to study the insurance industry in Malaysia. They need to provide information on the insurance industry in Malaysia, including the background of the insurance operator that they have been assigned to, information on the insurance product chosen, technology used by the company in servicing their client, and target client for the product.

Then, each group member must identify at least three prospects or potential buyers for their chosen insurance product in the second stage. Students were told not to choose other students as their prospect as this was to avoid familiarity among them and ensure the prospects chosen are qualified. Based on Futrell (2013), a qualified prospect must have money to buy, authorize to buy and, desire to buy. In addition, students must get their insurance agent's endorsement for all the proposed prospects. In the third stage, students were asked to meet at least one of the prospects and present their sales proposals. Students were required to record their meeting with the prospects to share their experience in the class. Finally, all groups gave a presentation explaining their experiences in performing the selling activities. Students were also encouraged to share their experiences with their classmates. Students arranged several meetings with their insurance agents throughout the assignment to seek guidance and advice. During the final presentation, insurance agents assigned to each group were also invited to listen and evaluate the groups' presentation.

Selling task evaluation

At the end of the course, students were asked to provide their feedback and opinion on the group assignment through an online evaluation form. Students were not required to reveal their names in the evaluation form to ensure sincere feedback on the group assignment, which

involved performing selling activities in a real sales environment. In the evaluation form, students were asked to give feedback on their interest in selling before taking the sales course, their understanding of the selling process, and skills obtained from performing selling activities in a real-life situation. Students were also asked an open-ended question regarding the benefits they gained from the group assignment given. Inputs from 42 students enrolled in the course were received and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of students

As shown in Table 1, out of 42 students enrolled in professional selling course, 28.6 percent of the students were males, while 71.4 percent were females. In terms of the students' Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), 4.8 percent of the students obtained CGPA of 3.5 and above, 47.6 percent obtained CGPA of between 3.0 and 3.49, 45.2 percent obtained CGPA between 2.5 and 2.99, while 2.4 percent obtained CGPA of 2.49 and below.

Table 1: Profile of students

Demographic Profile		Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28.6
	Female	71.4
CGPA	Below 2.49	2.4
	2.5 – 2.99	45.2
	3.0 – 3.49	47.6
	3.5 and above	4.8

Interest in selling

Students were asked about their interest in selling course before enrollment and their effort for the course compared to other courses. As shown in Figure 1, at the beginning of the course, 50 percent of the students had much more interest or an exceptional amount in selling before taking the course. In terms of effort students put in this course, 57.1 percent of the students mentioned that they somewhat put more effort in this course or much more in this course compared to other courses taken at the Faculty. In comparison, 64.3 percent claimed that they learned somewhat more in this course or much more in this course than other courses (see Figure 2).

Understanding of the selling process

In the class, students were taught the selling process recommended by Futrell (2013). The selling process includes prospecting, pre-approach, approach, sales presentation, trial close, meeting objections, and closing. Students gained real-world experience in prospecting from the group assignment, preparing selling material to meet potential clients and selling skills. The selling skills learned and applied by the student throughout the course included how to start a conversation with a potential client in a sales call, how to approach a client for the first time, how to assess potential client's needs in terms of insurance product, how to present

insurance product information, how to overcome client’s concerns and objections, and more importantly on how to close a sales call effectively.

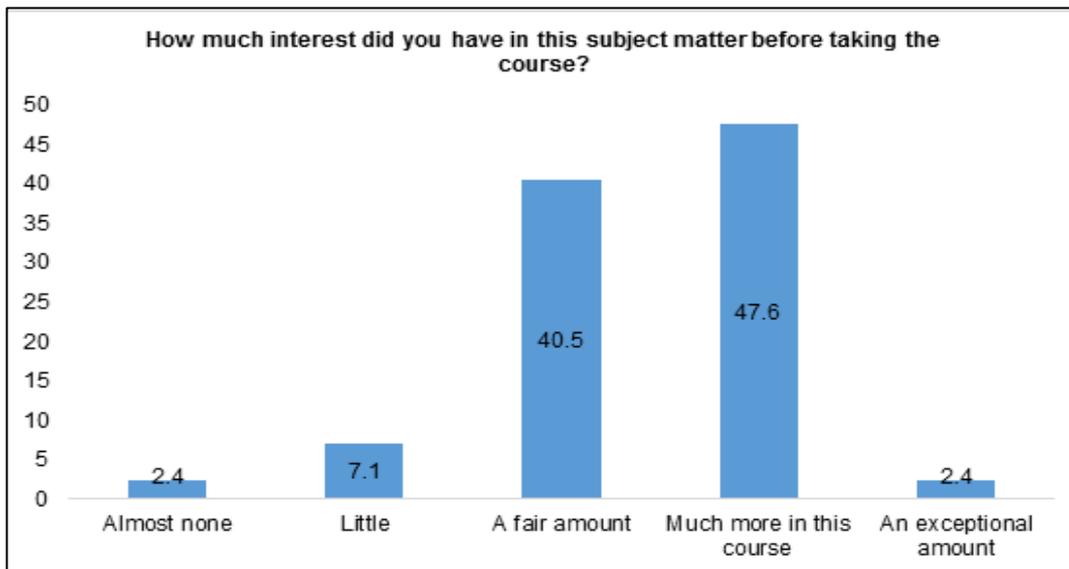
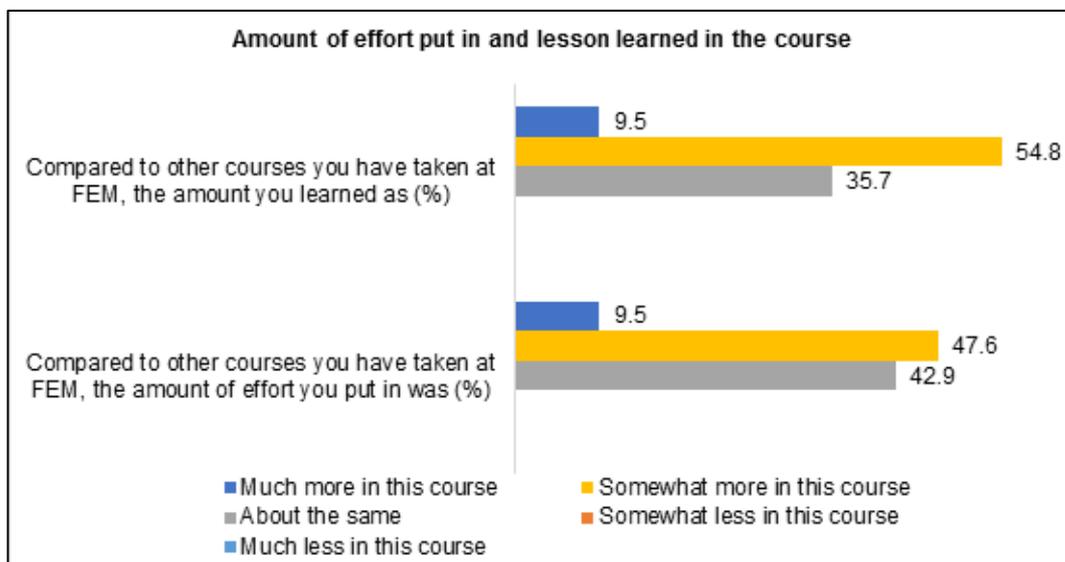


Figure 1: Interest in selling subject



*FEM refers to the Faculty

Figure 2: Amount of effort put and lesson learned in the course

Based on the group assignment task, students were asked to provide their feedback regarding their understanding of the selling process. As demonstrated in Figure 3, in general, 85.7 percent of the students understood the general selling process quite well or very well. In addition, 59.5 percent of the students understood the prospecting stage quite well or very well, while 57.2 percent of the students understood the pre-approach stage quite well or very well. 59.5 percent of the students understood the stage quite well in terms of approach, while 50 percent of the students understood the sales presentation stage quite well or very well. Then, 71.5 percent of the students understood somewhat or quite well the trial close stage, while 80.9

percent of the students somewhat or quite well understood the meeting objections process. Finally, 66.7 percent of the students somewhat or quite well understood the closing stage.

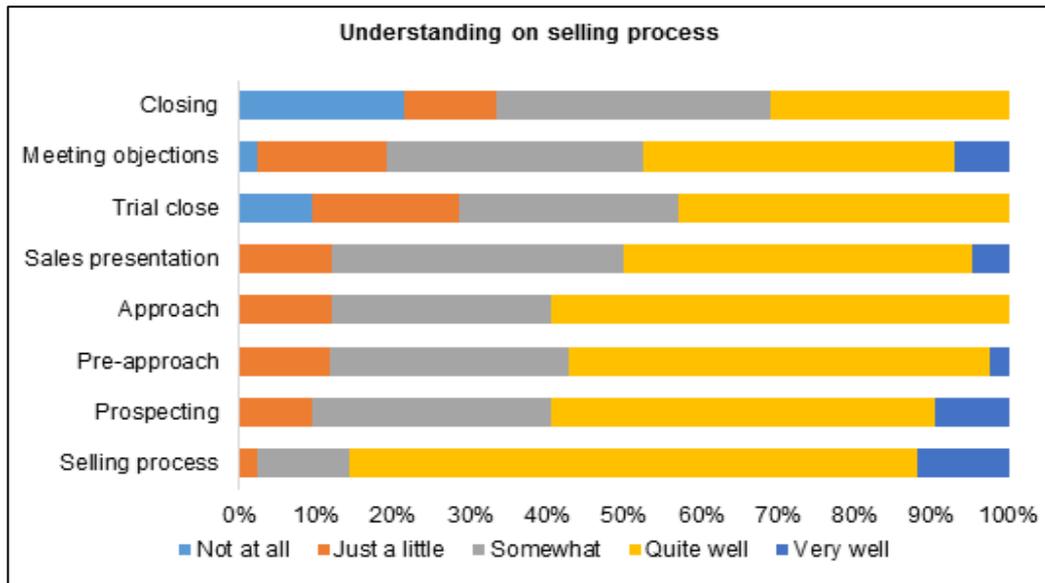


Figure 3: Understanding of the selling process

Skills obtained from the class

Students were also asked on the skills they obtained from the class. Students have rated that working effectively with others as the main skill gained from the task. As shown in Figure 4, 61.9 percent of the students claimed that they gained skill on working effectively with others quite a lot or a great deal. Then, 59.5 percent of the students claimed that they obtained confidence in meeting their client quite a lot or a great deal. 57.1 percent of them mentioned that they gained solving problem skills and designing a sales presentation while 47.6 percent of the students gained skills in giving oral presentation quite a lot or a great deal.

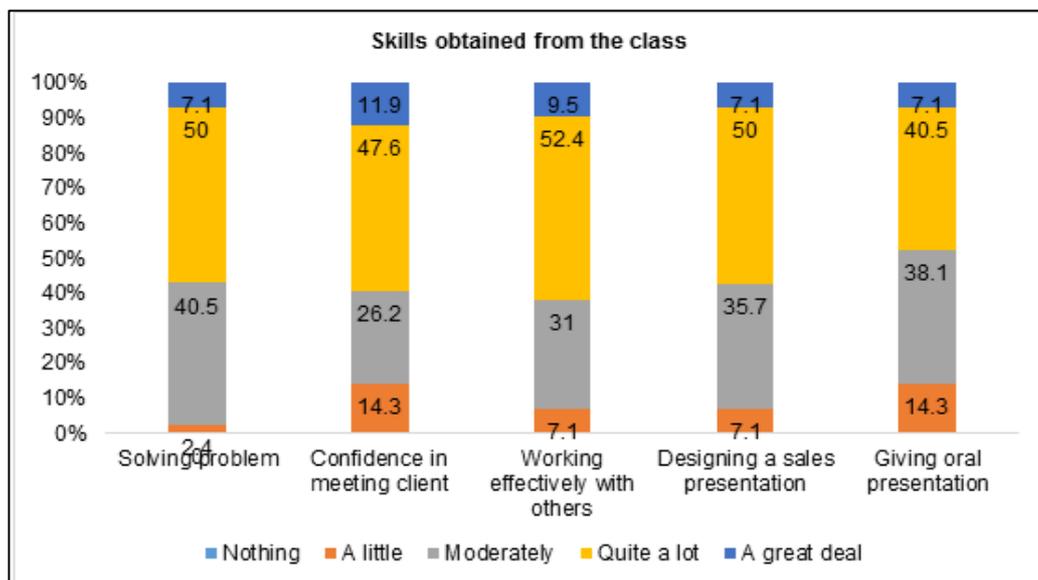


Figure 4: Skills obtained from the class

Finally, students were asked how much of what they have learned in the class (including knowledge, skills, and others) that they think they will remember and carry with them into other classes or other aspects of their lives. As demonstrated in Figure 5, 81 percent of the students mentioned that they would remember and carry with them the knowledge and skills gained into other classes or aspects of their life quite a lot or a great deal.

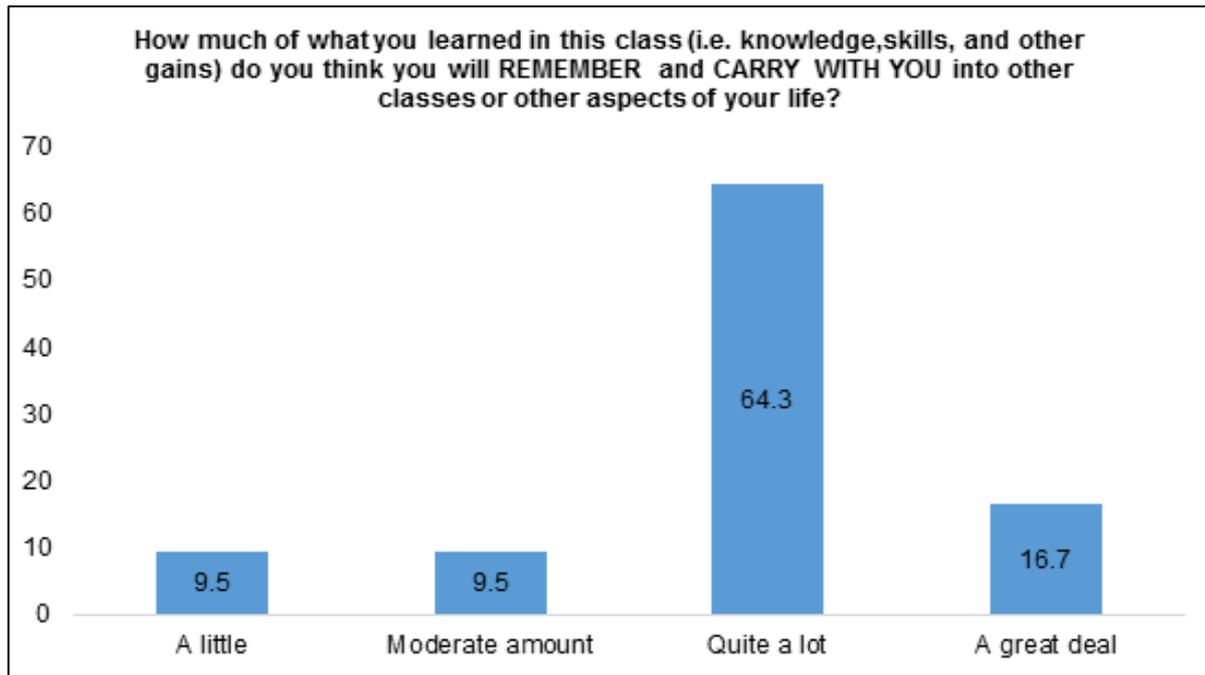


Figure 5: Life-long learning

Students were asked an open-ended question on the benefits gained from the group assignment. Three major themes were uncovered. The first theme identified was related to a selling career. With guidance from the insurance agents, students had the opportunity to perform all the selling processes from prospecting, pre-approach, approach, sales presentation, trial close, meeting objections, and closing. Students claimed that they had a better picture of selling career from the group assignment. Also, students who may not be aware of what they want to do after they graduate start to explore selling career paths after attempting the group assignment. Some of the students mentioned that the selling experience made them develop more awareness of their future career and motivated them to choose selling as their career.

Secondly, the opportunity to perform selling has enabled the students to develop soft skills such as critical thinking, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills (i.e., dealing with other people) that contribute to professional experience and employability skills. Students learn to work more effectively together as a team and apply critical thinking in dealing with clients. As suggested by Nasr (2004) cited in Lee (2008), experiential education benefitted the student in a tangible manner and has the potential to produce a student with a higher aptitude for obtaining the soft skills employers in today’s market so desperately seek.

The third and the most significant benefits are that experiential learning succeeds as a teaching methodology in getting students to learn selling concepts more deeply than they can via lecture alone by making them involve directly in selling and dealing with real clients.

Students may have difficulties understanding the selling concept using traditional teaching methods such as lectures, textbooks, and assignments. With experiential learning, students were allowed to apply the selling concept in a real-world situation. Furthermore, Dewey (1938), cited in Lee (2008), claimed that for real learning to occur at deeper levels, that education needed to be grounded in experience, and that experience needed to be accompanied by the student's active reflection on his or her experience. Hence, the group assignment allows students to apply what they learn in the classroom in an actual selling environment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

24 percent of Malaysia's employers found that the most difficult professionals to recruit are sales (Hays, 2015). Sales course is commonly offered in any universities; however, it is challenging for educators to incorporate practical aspects of sales subject into teaching. Role-plays have been often used in sales classes to enhance specific selling skills (Moncrief and Shipp, 1994). Although role-plays have been found as one of the most effective ways to engage students, and the application of role-playing will initiate and maintain learning (Baruch, 2006), they lack realism (Moncrief & Shipp, 1994). Furthermore, Fogel, Hoffmesiter, Rocco, and Strunk (2012) suggested that the best way to launch a new sales education program seems to partner with the industry.

In this study, students were asked to conduct selling in an actual selling environment under the supervision of insurance agents. Students had the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge and gain practical experience in meeting real clients. Although the whole group assignment took place for 14 weeks, students were also exposed by their insurance agent to many other activities involving salesperson jobs such as attending product training, product launch, and networking.

Overall feedback from students on the group assignment gathered from the closed and open-ended questionnaire has been very positive. Students' evaluation of the activity revealed that students gained several skills, including working effectively with others, developing confidence in meeting client, solving problems, and giving an oral presentation. Furthermore, 81 percent of the students mentioned that they would remember and carry the knowledge and skills gained into other classes or aspects of their life quite a lot or a great deal.

The findings of this study suggest that selling course can include selling activities in a real sales environment as part of the course assessment to improve student understanding of the subject and for students to gain selling skills. Also, bringing students outside the classroom into the real working environment gives students an authentic glimpse of what it is like to work in the field and the different kinds of challenges that they will meet. This experiential learning task also gives students the chance to interact with real insurance agents, which provides additional learning and networking opportunities. While this type of assessment can be time-consuming for any sales course instructor, there is also great satisfaction in knowing the assignment is helping the student to understand and experience the selling subject matter better.

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