Client Consulting Projects on the Block: Understanding Sources of Tension

Lora Louise Broady[a] and Christina A. Rader[a]

Corresponding author: Christina Rader (crader@coloradocollege.edu)
[a]Department of Economics and Business, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 80907, United States

Author Note Authors contributed equally.

Abstract

In this article, we consider client consulting projects embedded in a course on a 3.5-week block, with a particular focus on the tensions inherent in teaching and learning with such projects. Client consulting projects offer a unique pedagogical approach that tasks student teams with helping a client solve a current problem. Such approaches merit study for block formats because other research on the semester-basis shows that consulting projects contain elements known to increase student learning outcomes; block plans are likely to offer added benefits as well as unique challenges and tensions. Using a mixed-methods approach centred on reflective case writing about two different courses that offer client consulting projects and supplemented by data from students and clients, we investigated the benefits, challenges, tensions, and key success factors in client consulting projects on a 3.5-week block. Overall, the major stakeholders – faculty, students, and clients – agreed that the benefits outweighed the challenges. Especially salient were the benefits to students of real-world experience, increased motivation and sense of meaningfulness, and the chance to deepen their learning by applying course concepts. Challenges include the stress involved for the students and faculty with fitting the project into the block and pleasing the client, plus the time invested by faculty to make the projects happen. Most importantly, client consulting projects on the block present five tensions: the dual-evaluation nature of the project (both the professor and client are evaluating), the level of client engagement and alignment, scheduling and pacing, the level of professor guidance, and the degree of emphasis on traditional course content vs. the project. Keys to success include setting expectations, building trust, having clear structure and organization, and developing teamwork skills and roles. The understanding of tensions gained through this research will position faculty for greater success with client consulting projects in block formats.

Keywords: Block model, teaching and learning, consulting, work-integrated learning, professional experience

Introduction

Block and intensive learning formats are known for the opportunities they provide for unique pedagogical experiences, from outdoor education (Simson-Woods & Kappes, 2023) to integrated multidisciplinary research (Eason et al., 2023). In this article, we consider another unique pedagogy: client consulting projects embedded in a course on a 3.5-week block. By client consulting projects, we mean projects that task student teams with helping a client solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity in their current operations. Furthermore, we focus on client consulting projects embedded in a course for students to immediately apply what they are learning, rather than a separate, stand-alone practicum devoted solely to the client consulting projects. In our examination, we focus on the benefits, challenges, tensions, and keys to success for client consulting projects. We give particular attention to the tensions: places where gaining a benefit from the client consulting project entails a concomitant challenge or a trade-off with another benefit.

Client consulting projects deserve study because they are likely to benefit student learning, based on research on work-integrated learning (Dean et al., 2023; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023). Work-integrated learning (WIL) involves connecting students, universities, and external stakeholders to provide students with authentic work experiences that bring together classroom theory and workplace practice (Zegwaard et al., 2023). WIL can take on many forms, such as placements with employers or projects, like the client consulting projects considered here (Universities Australia, 2019). WIL improves student work-readiness and academic performance and is associated with many psycho-social benefits, such as greater confidence and community citizenship (Arsenis & Flores, 2021; Jackson, 2015; Salter et al., 2021; Tanaka & Carlson, 2012). Studies specifically focused on WIL experiences like consulting practicums indicate that students benefit from offering an informed opinion on real management problems (Heriot et al., 2008). For example, in studies of the efficacy of consulting practicum (CP) in the field of Management Information Science (MIS), results show that "students developed essential career-related competencies and behavioural skills as an indication of career readiness, thus affirming CP as an innovative pedagogical strategy that can enhance students' readiness for professional careers in MIS" (Akpan, 2016, p. 412).

Additionally, client consulting projects are likely to deepen students' learning because they combine two pedagogical practices deemed "high impact practices" (or HIPs) by the American Association of Colleges and Universities: (1) collaborative assignments and projects and (2) service/community-based learning (AACU, n.d.). Collaborative assignments and projects focus on learning to work and solve problems in a team and sharpening one's own understanding by listening to the insights of others (AACU, n.d.). Such experiences are especially effective in promoting self-understanding and appreciation of alternative views (Kuh et al., 2017). Service/community-based learning gives students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum while analyzing and solving problems in the community. A key element of these programs is the opportunity for students to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their experiences (AACU, n.d.). Studies have shown a strong relationship between the high-impact practice of service-learning and clusters of effective educational practices including the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

Considering client consulting projects in block and intensive learning formats is especially important because such formats are likely to offer distinct benefits and challenges for consulting projects. The frequency and pacing of classes in block models allow more concentrated and focused periods of learning, supporting pedagogical approaches that prioritize student-centred learning. This in turn emphasizes an immersive nature of learning (Muscat & Thomas, 2023) which aligns with the intensive work of consulting. Additionally, in the block model, students are positioned as active knowledge and meaning makers who develop knowledge through inquiry, action, or experimentation, often involving collaborative, peer-peer interactions (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). Such positioning and interactions are integral to successful client consulting projects. Finally, the condensed structure and smaller class sizes of the block model contribute to the cultivation of strong and meaningful relationships between teachers and students (Muscat & Thomas, 2023), which helps shape successful client projects. To effectively manage client projects on the block, trust between students and teachers is needed (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). Client projects may also benefit from block model delivery in promoting social cohesion enabling students to develop a strong sense of belonging resulting in a positive correlation between academic achievement and academic enjoyment (Pedler et al., 2022).

Furthermore, studies of WIL in intensive formats suggest that WIL can be very effective in such formats (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2024). To be effective, intensive WIL experiences should meet key quality indicators such as intentional design, quality supervision, and regular liaison between workplace and university supervisors (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2024). Client consulting projects in intensive formats may also promote equity because all students engage in the WIL opportunities of the projects as a required part of the course, rather than having to schedule a separate longer placement or practicum, which may not meet the needs of all students (Rowe et al., 2023). Studies of intensive WIL (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2024) have included case studies of project-based work but have not specifically focused on client consulting projects in depth. Therefore, the current work seeks to address that gap.

Given the likely benefits of client consulting projects, it is important to consider the challenges and tensions that may accompany those benefits, especially when taught in the block format. For example, moving from the semester to the block format can present challenges with workload (Oraison et al., 2023) that may be exacerbated with client consulting projects. Our aim, therefore, is to help educators understand the tensions so they can effectively use client consulting projects in a block or intensive learning format.

This paper proceeds as follows: The method section details our mixed-methods approach focusing on reflective case writing plus additional data from clients and students, which we apply to two different business courses. The results section presents our findings on the benefits, challenges, tensions, and keys to success for client consulting projects on block formats. We conclude with discussion of the implications for researchers and practitioners.

Method

We used a mixed-method approach to study two business courses where we offer client consulting projects. Our research method centered on reflexive case writing (Carr et al., 2015). We supplemented the reflexive case writing with additional data from surveys and interviews

of students and clients, plus secondary data generated during the courses via course evaluations and in-class surveys.

Block and Institutional Context

We studied client consulting projects in the context of the 3.5-week block schedule offered at Colorado College, a small undergraduate liberal arts college with total enrolment of approximately 2,400 students. In the 3.5-week block, students typically take a single course from 9 am to noon every weekday, for 18 consecutive weekdays, ending on the 4th Wednesday and followed by a 4.5-day "block break" and a new class starting on Monday. Students are expected to complete approximately 4 to 5 hours of classwork outside of the 3-hour class period; most students do so, with the student population consisting of high-achieving and highly motivated students. Regarding demographics, the student body identifies as 68% White, 26% students of colour (including mixed race), and 8% international; 42% receive need-based aid; and 10% are first-generation students. In the Economics and Business Department, where the two courses considered here reside, the gender balance in courses is approximately 75% male and 25% female.

Courses Studied

We studied two courses: Business Organization and Management (hereafter, "Management") and Consumer Marketing (hereafter, "Marketing"). Syllabi and the client consulting project assignment are available at the supplementary files repository here: https://osf.io/49rvp/.

Management

The Management course is required for all students in our interdisciplinary major in Business, Economics, and Society. The course teaches concepts related to people at work, such as motivation, teamwork, strategic human resources management, organizational culture, and leadership. Students may take the course in their sophomore, junior, or senior year, with most students being seniors or juniors. For the client consulting project, students work with clients from different administrative divisions of the college, such as Human Resources or the Office of the President, on a project related to "people problems" in the organization. Past topics have included how to improve the performance review process, how to appeal to the younger generation of workers, how to organize major organizational change initiatives, and how to develop an academic department mission statement. Importantly, the course teaches a specific approach to management, called Evidence-Based Management (Barends & Rousseau, 2018) that stresses the need to make management decisions in a conscientious way that gathers information from a variety of sources and assesses the quality of the information before arriving at a conclusion. Students receive their client assignments on the second day of the 18-day block, meet with their clients on the third day of the block, and present their final work on the 17th day of the block. Approximately half of the daily in-class time is devoted to the client consulting project, with activities such as skill-building for the project, working in teams on the project, and getting professor feedback. Students' grades are weighted to put 35% on the team product of the client consulting project, plus approximately 20% for individual contributions related to the team project.

For the current research, we studied the last three offerings of the course: Fall 2022, Spring 2023, and Fall 2023. The 2022 Fall and 2023 Spring offerings were taught by Christina Rader and had approximately 26 students each. The 2023 Fall offering was co-taught by Christina

Rader and Lora Louise Broady, with 31 students. Project team sizes ranged from 5-6 members in earlier offerings to 7-8 members in the most recent offering, for a total of 4-5 different projects run simultaneously in each course offering.

The key activities and deliverables for the project include: (a) an initial client meeting on the 3rd day of class; (b) multiple drafts of the client presentation and report, which must incorporate both a systematic literature review and an analysis of original data collected by the students in surveys or interviews; (c) a practice presentation on the 15th day of class; (d) a final report and presentation to the client on the 17th day of class; and (e) a revised final report on the 18th day of class to address any client questions or opportunities. Clients are informed that each student will devote at least 30 hours to the project; most students devote closer to 60 hours each.

Marketing

The Marketing course fulfills a requirement for students in the major but is not strictly required – students may use other courses to meet the requirement. The course teaches fundamental consumer marketing concepts such as the key elements of marketing strategy (termed the "marketing mix": product, price, place, and promotion). Students typically take the course in their junior or senior year. For the client consulting project, students work with external clients (often CEOs, CMOs or upper marketing management). The purpose of this assignment is to create a marketing plan in response to a specific real-world client's need. Students choose their client team in groups of five and are given a creative brief describing the details of the client project. The Client Projects are led by marketing executives across industries, each with a unique challenge. Students' grades are weighted to put 40% on the team product of the client consulting project, plus approximately 12% for individual contributions related to the team project (such as skill-building exercises or reflections on team processes). We studied the most-recent offering of the course, taught in Fall 2023 by Lora Louise Broady, which was the first offering of the course to emphasize client consulting projects.

The key activities and deliverables for the project include: (a) an initial client meeting on the 3rd day of class; (b) multiple drafts of the client presentation and report, which may incorporate both secondary research and an analysis of original data collected by the students in surveys or interviews; (c) submission of the situation analysis portion of the marketing plan on the 11th day of class; (d) submission of the recommendation portion of marketing plan on the 13th day of the class, (e) a practice presentation on the 15th day of class; (f) a final report and presentation to the client on the 17th day of class; and (g) a revised final report on the 18th day of class to address any client questions or opportunities.

Reflexive Case Writing Method

Reflexive case writing formed the foundation of our research method. Reflexive case writing requires researchers to write stories of pivotal or critical elements of their teaching as "cases" and then reflect collectively upon the content of the cases (Carr et al., 2015; Shulman, 1986). The method has previously been used successfully to study pedagogy in block and intensive learning (Muscat & Thomas, 2023). We wrote a total of eleven reflexive cases about elements we deemed to be significant parts of teaching with client consulting projects on the block, including subjects such as recruiting clients, the initial client meeting, the first review of the entire draft, and the final presentation. After writing the first two reflexive cases, we conferred on our progress and determined that we had a particular interest in the tensions present in client

consulting projects on the block; we then wrote more cases with tensions in mind. Cases ranged in length from two to seven paragraphs; an excerpt is provided with the supplementary files linked previously. Each researcher then coded each case for "threads" – crucial meanings and key ideas. We reviewed all coding and then engaged in individual reflection and joint discussion to develop overarching themes.

Additional Methods

We supplemented the reflexive case writing method with additional data from surveys, interviews, and secondary data.

Surveys and Interviews

We conducted surveys and interviews with students and clients. All surveys and interviews received ethics approval from the Colorado College Institutional Research Board before the commencement of the study.

For the student survey, we invited the 92 students from the four course offerings under consideration to complete a short anonymous survey about the client consulting project. We received 20 responses. (Because we anticipated teaching some students again in future courses, we did not collect any demographic information that could identify students when combined with their responses and thus do not report age, gender, or race.) The survey asked quantitative questions about students' perceptions of the client consulting project's benefits and challenges (7 questions, such as "The student/client project helped me understand the concepts from class.") and skill-building (7 questions, such as "The student/client project built my skills in working with a team."). Skill-building questions were modelled on the behavioural and technical skills in Akpan's (2016) study of a consulting practicum in management information systems. Questions were Likert-format on a scale of *1 = Strongly disagree*, *2 = Disagree*, *3 = Neither agree nor disagree*, *4 = Agree*, and *5 = Strongly agree*. The survey also contained open-ended questions about the benefits of the client consulting project, ideas for improvements, and the effects of the compressed 3.5-week block. The second author coded the qualitative responses for the themes developed from the reflective case writing, plus any additional themes observed in the data.

For the student interviews, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five students. Three had taken both courses; one had taken only Management; one had taken only Marketing. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and focused on perceived benefits, challenges, and improvements to the client consulting project. All students interviewed are identified using pseudonyms.

For the client surveys, we invited the 17 former clients for the courses under study to complete a brief survey. We received 4 responses. The quantitative and qualitative questions mirrored those in the student survey, except the first seven questions about benefits and challenges were tailored to the client experience, such as "The student/client project provided a feeling of satisfaction in helping students becoming future leaders."

For the client interviews and debriefs, we interviewed two clients about their experiences, one from each course. Interviews lasted 30 minutes and focused on perceived benefits, challenges, and improvements to the client consulting project. Additionally, Lora Louise Broady conducted

a debrief with two other clients from Marketing prior to starting this research paper and their responses are included, with the clients' permission.

Secondary Data: Course Evaluations and In-class Anonymous Survey

We included secondary data generated in the normal practice of teaching the courses from two sources: course evaluations and an anonymous in-class survey in Management. The use of secondary data received ethics approval from the Colorado College Institutional Research Board.

A total of 109 course evaluation responses were available. We used responses to three open-ended questions, specifically "What features of this course made the most valuable contributions to your learning?" "What were the important strengths and limitations of the course?" and "Are there any other comments?"

The Management course included an anonymous survey completed in-class on the last day of the course. There was a total of 78 respondents. The survey asked a variety of questions about the course. We used data from the question: "Please reflect on the assignments and major readings / activities: Client consulting project. Should future versions of the course keep the item as is, alter it, or delete it? If alter it, how do you recommend altering it?" We also considered the answers to the question: "Any other anonymous comments you would like to give about the course?"

The second author coded the responses for the themes developed from the reflective case writing, plus any additional themes observed in the data.

Results

In our results, we focus on five major areas of tension in client consulting projects on the 3.5-week block. We chose to focus on tensions because we believe tensions to be an inherent part of teaching on the block with client consulting projects; a greater understanding of tensions would position faculty to better anticipate and address critical tensions. Before detailing the five tensions, we give a brief overview of the benefits and challenges of the client consulting projects. After the tensions, we share our approaches to addressing tensions. We centre the results on our reflective case writing, which we supplement with the results of the additional data from the students and clients.

Benefits and Challenges

Our reflective case writing revealed both benefits and challenges of teaching using client consulting projects on the 3.5-week block. Tables 1 and 2, respectively, give an overview of the benefits and challenges we identified for different stakeholders: students, clients, faculty, and the college administration. Based on our reflections, the benefits were found to be compelling while the challenges were workable, creating a strong case for adopting client projects on the block. In particular, students gain the opportunity to apply what they are learning in a real-world context, experience greater motivation, build strong relationships with their peers and professors, and gain valuable professional skills.

Data from students and clients align with our assessment of the many benefits and their predominance over the challenges. In the anonymous in-class survey in the Management course, 86% wanted to keep the project as is or largely as is, 14% said to alter it, and no one

said to delete it. In the survey of students conducted specifically for this research, students indicated that they perceived significant benefits, with an average score across all 14 questions of 4.46 out of 5, indicating their agreement they obtained benefits and skills (*4 = Agree* and *5 = Strongly agree*). Complete results of the quantitative questions on the student and client surveys and supportive quotes are available in the supplemental files. In the open-ended questions on the course evaluations, 54% of students listed the client consulting project as an element of the course that made the most valuable contribution to their learning. In the student survey, the real-world nature of the project, the skill-building (especially presentation skills) and the team experience stood out as key benefits. Seventy percent of respondents mentioned the real-world nature of the project as a benefit; forty-five percent of student survey respondents talked about skill-building, and of those, one-third specifically identified presentations skills; and forty-five percent discussed teamwork. Clients also perceived benefits to themselves and skill building by the students, with an average score from clients of 4.23 out of 5. Clients seemed especially motivated by helping students become future leaders. For example, Sanjana Simon, Brand Manager, Tim Hortons, said "I was a student and I had client projects myself. Honestly, those were some of the most helpful times… I think the best way to learn is through practical experiences… I wanted to do the same for these kids."

Along with the benefits came challenges. Our reflections revealed particular challenges with the stress involved for the students and faculty with fitting the project into the block and pleasing the client, plus the time invested by faculty to make the projects happen. Student responses affirm our reflections. All the students interviewed were nervous when they first learned they would be engaging in client consulting projects, often expressing a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. In the student survey, the key challenges noted were the limited time and the significant stress. Thirty-five percent of respondents found the limited time to be a challenge and twenty percent of survey respondents discussed stress.

Crucially, our reflections suggested that the benefits and challenges often came together in areas of tension: places where obtaining a benefit may necessarily entail enduring a challenge. Because of the pivotal nature of such tensions, our discussion of results focuses on those tensions as described in the next section.

Table 1 Benefits of Client Consulting Projects on the Block

Stakeholders	Benefits
Students	• Real world experience • Presentation skill building • Teamwork and collaboration • Résumé building and professional development • Applying classroom concepts • Engaging with interesting professionals • Exposure to interesting business problems • Learning how to run a consulting project - all phases (problem framing, research, solution design, presenting deliverables)
Clients	• Garnering fresh thinking and innovative perspectives • Practical solutions to real business problems • Exposure to students as potential future leaders • Access to a pool for potential recruitment • Strengthened ties to alma mater • Professional cachet in working with future leaders • Opportunity to reframe their own thinking
Faculty	• Deep satisfaction in enabling student-client interaction • Pride in enabling students to gain real-world experience • Strengthening ties with clients and alumni • Opportunity to contribute to strategic goals of the organization • Engaging in meaningful and practical education • Enhancing academic/professional reputation • Hone skills in project management
Administration	• Rekindling relationships with prominent alumni • Serving the community through impactful projects • Aligning with strategic goals of the college • Attracting and retaining high-caliber students • Contributing to successful student outcomes • Building a network of engaged and satisfied alumni

Table 2 Challenges of Client Consulting Projects on the Block

Stakeholder	Challenges
Students	• Time pressures • Balancing academic and client pressures • Expectation management • Team coordination • Client satisfaction • Project management • Courage to ask for help
Clients	• Managing expectations on quality of work • Limited client-student interactions • Scheduling challenges • Relevance of project – ensuring it is related to business needs • Engaging with students effectively • Balancing with workplace demands
Faculty	• Huge lift in recruiting, scheduling, managing • Stress in allowing students to struggle • Project management including scheduling, communicating, sharing information with fellow faculty and college administrators, thank you gifts, zoom provisions (camera, mic, calendaring) • Facilitating and nurturing teamwork for collaborative success • Balancing support vs struggle – e.g., stress in allowing the students to struggle • Risk of underperforming with high-profile clients
Administration	• Reputational risk if client project is not successful • Instilling a learning approach to continuous improvement

The Five Tension Areas

The central focus of our research is on the tensions inherent in teaching using client consulting projects on the block. Understanding these tensions is essential to effective pedagogy with consulting projects. We identified five key tensions:

- the dual-evaluation nature (both client and professor evaluate)
- the level of client engagement and alignment
- scheduling and pacing
- the level of professor guidance
- the degree of emphasis on traditional course content vs. the consulting project

Tension 1: The Dual-Evaluation Nature of the Consulting Project

Courses with client consulting projects have two evaluators: the client and the professor. Our reflections showed this dual-evaluation nature of the project to be a major tension that can cause anxiety for both students and professors, especially on the block. Students can be unclear about who they are trying to please and feel conflicted. Professors cannot control the reactions or guidance that clients give the students. We (the authors) have experienced these tensions throughout all stages of the projects. In the initial client discovery meeting, students often find themselves wanting to do everything the client potentially wants while the professors are advocating for keeping the project manageable. With the first full draft of the project, we have seen students react to the stress of trying to please the client by reaching beyond their analysis to develop grand solutions that are unsupported by the data. Additionally, trying to please the clients puts extra pressure on us as professors, because it often feels like the professors are the only ones who can help (versus other projects where there is more help available from academic support services, etc.). This pressure can have particularly high peaks on the 3.5-week block as opposed to on a semester plan. For example, when Christina Rader had a family crisis during the last full week of the block, she still chose to provide feedback on the project before it would go to the client; had it not been a client consulting project, she would have adjusted the feedback schedule to better meet her own life needs. Finally, the dual-evaluation nature causes anxiety for both professors and students about the client reaction. We know how hard the students have worked and can see their learning and progress, but there is no guarantee that the clients will recognize the good work (they often do, but not always). Sometimes the clients have found parts of the project most interesting that we find the weakest, and vice versa. On the 3.5-week block, there is little time to redirect when clients give feedback we disagree with before the block ends and students leave with the wrong impression. Furthermore, because the block plan leads to hyperfocus on a single course, the desire to please the client can take on outsize importance compared to what we might expect with a semester-based class.

Students noted challenges with the dual-evaluation nature of the project. For example, one student interviewed talked about the stress from working with clients who might not be happy: "That's the real world, the client won't always be happy, but it can be really discouraging when you're a student and it's your first time doing it. And the expectations weren't met. And then there's this fear that it's going to impact your grade…. There's a lot of stress around client projects because you wanna please them and do good work. But at the end of the day, they could decide it's not good enough" (Kyra). (As a reminder, all student names given are pseudonyms.) A particular challenge students saw with the dual-evaluation nature results from

the fact that the projects address diverse clients' needs, and therefore projects may have varying levels of difficulty. For example, 8% of students responding to the in-class survey noted differences in difficulty between projects and roles, with one student saying, "the difficulty of the projects [was] pretty different and should probably be more aligned in terms of the level of commitment needed" (2024 Fall Management, Response #49).

Tension 2: Level of Client Engagement and Alignment

While working with real clients makes the project incredibly motivating to students, our reflections emphasized the tensions related to the level of engagement with the client and the degree of alignment between the client and student teams about aims and deliverables. It is difficult to balance respect for clients' busy schedules with the potential benefit of more frequent interactions. At a minimum, students need to engage with the client twice: once at the start of the project to determine the scope and deliverables and once at the end to present their final work. In real-word consulting projects, a higher level of relationship-building with the client is the norm and helps to clearly define expectations from both client and consultant. More client engagement presents great opportunities, such as to confirm the scope and deliverables after the initial meeting, get feedback on initial work to shape the final deliverable, build trust, and create a more substantial relationship with the client. With important, real clients, however, simply scheduling them for the minimum two meetings is difficult. Each additional moment of client engagement puts exponential demands on professors, as the feedback and support of the student teams must be shoehorned into the tight schedule. For example, in the past, Christina Rader had students email their clients after the initial client meeting to confirm their understanding of the project, but she abandoned that step when she saw how much time it was taking away from other work on the project as well as the investment needed from her to make sure that the communications were not burdensome to the clients (some students wanted to write multi-page emails, for example). Additionally, the greater the client investment, the more pressure the professors feel for the student project to provide value to the client.

Getting everyone on the same page about the aims of the project and how to accomplish them can be especially difficult due to the compressed nature of the block. In our reflections, we especially noted the tension between having a fully-predefined client problem versus allowing space for students to struggle with shaping the problem with the client; the former leads to greater alignment on aims but sacrifices the skill-building of the latter; the former requires more faculty time before the course begins whereas the latter puts more pressure on the faculty member to intervene should alignment not occur. Given the time pressure of the block, students feel the stress of devoting time to shaping alignment around the problem versus working on the solution. Additionally, we have seen client needs and interest morphing over the course of the project – even in the short 3.5-week block. Sometimes, when students have come back to the client to confirm their direction after the initial client discovery meeting, the client's ideas have changed drastically. In such instances, the professors face the question of whether to have the students stay on the original path or redirect, knowing that the clock is ticking. Furthermore, the desire for ongoing dialogue with the client must be balanced with the availability of the client – which can be further limited by the short 3.5-week block as opposed to a semester system – and the other demands of the course. Lacking alignment with the client also poses problems for alignment among teammates and the time pressure of the block can make resolution difficult.

Interestingly, all four clients we interviewed or debriefed expressed a willingness to invest more time in the project, both through informal communication throughout the block and through additional meetings to (1) confirm the scope and deliverables after the initial meeting and (2) share progress at the 75% mark to give an opportunity to redirect. Students also expressed an interest in increasing the level of client engagement, with all students interviewed and 25% of student survey respondents suggesting more communication with the client. (Interestingly, the theme of increased client engagement was not prominent in the course evaluations or in-class survey.)

Students and clients also noted tensions with alignment. In the student survey, 20% of respondents discussed alignment, with most comments centering on having more communication with the client and one comment noting the stress when the client wants to change something. The students we interviewed were interested in more meetings with the client to increase alignment. For example, "I recognize this is difficult because we're already taking time out of these busy clients' lives. That being said, I think it could be improved by having a midway meeting with the client. So partway through the block, after we have our initial briefing, I think it would be great to touch base with the direction that we're heading, what we've come up with so far to make sure that everyone's on the same page... I think there was a little confusion on our project, for example" (Rick). At the same time, students were aware of the difficulties that additional meetings could present, especially if alignment is not present at the 75% mark: "I think it would be hard to completely pivot at that point. So again, that's a challenge that you face with the block plan is you're working with a time constraint…" (Rick).

All four clients interviewed or debriefed were interested in actions to improve alignment and indicated that they would have found the time for such efforts. For example, Deane Mallot, Board Member, National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), recommended "integrating feedback loops into the consulting project process." Sanjana Simon, Brand Manager, Tim Hortons, agreed, and said, "I would have made the time for it. I love doing things like this."

Students and clients interviewed both noted the value of the students having to figure out the problem and scope, rather than it being perfectly predefined by their professors. Client Molly Bodnar, Interim Vice President for Advancement at Colorado College, said "I liked the fact that it wasn't totally as fleshed out as it could have been from the get-go, and they [students] are the ones who helped refine it." Students agreed that there was learning value in having to define the problem: "What was interesting from my project in particular is that we didn't really know what the problem was like about halfway through. That was what I didn't expect. I was like, whoa, OK, we've got to kind of pivot and like figure out how to get what we need to solve the problem" (Rebecca).

Tension 3: Scheduling and Pacing

Scheduling and pacing present another major area of tension in client consulting projects on the block. Our reflections identified several areas of particular tension. At the start of the project, we experience tension with the timing of the initial client discovery meeting. Putting the meeting on the third day of the block helps the students launch the project with maximum time to completion, but it means they are starting on the project before they know much of the course content and with little time to prepare for the meeting; in a semester system, we could

delay the initial meeting by a few weeks without much cost to the time for students to complete the project. After the client meeting, there is a tension between spending time honing the direction of the project versus getting started and potentially having to redo work. At the end of the project, the due date for the complete draft presents serious trade-offs: should it be several days early, allowing more time to polish? Or should it be closer to the final presentation, giving more time to work on the analysis?

Interviews, surveys, and course evaluations supported the existence of these tensions in scheduling and pacing. Of the student survey respondents, 20% discussed issues of pacing, with suggestions like starting the project even earlier, meeting more with the client, and having more time to practice their presentation. In the course evaluations, 7% of students noted challenges with timing and pacing, such as "The client project helps [sic] me to learn a lot. However, things could be tough for the first two weeks that there are [sic] so much stuff going on" (2024 Fall Management, Response #31). Another student interviewed noticed the pacing challenges toward the end of the Management course: "I think the presentation and the… final report -- the first draft -- they were due on the same day… so there is a lot…" (Issac).

Tension 4: Level of Professor Guidance

In any course, a professor will have to make important decisions about when and how to provide guidance to students, yet our reflections revealed that decisions about guidance for client consulting projects seem particularly consequential and imbued with tensions. Given that the aim of the project is for students to apply concepts in a real-world context, struggle is an important part of the learning. However, the time pressure, complexity, specialized knowledge and expertise requirements of the project plus the seemingly high-stakes nature of the project make professor intervention often necessary and beneficial to learning and stress management. How does the professor know when it is time to intervene? The decision of when and how to intervene often feels even more important than in a regular class. For example, in the initial client discovery meeting, the students lead the meeting while the professors sit off to the side outside of the client's line of sight. We intentionally let the students struggle up to about 40 minutes of the 60-minute meeting and then pull them aside to intervene if they are getting off track. Sometimes we give suggestions; sometimes we stage strong interventions (such as assigning specific students to ask the clients questions we dictate verbatim.) About halfway through the project, students often experience a sense of worry and overwhelm because inevitably some part of the project is not working. (We believe this level of worry is likely heightened by the 3.5-week block limiting time to make adjustments to the project, as opposed to a semester system.) Again, we face a decision about whether to give the students strong direction on how to proceed or simply ask guiding questions that will help them figure it out for themselves. Furthermore, not all project teams progress at the same rate or have projects of equal difficulty, and we find ourselves torn between giving equal in-class feedback time to all teams or spending more time with the struggling groups.

Students do not appear to have noticed the tensions in the level of professor guidance as much as the other tensions. The one element mentioned occasionally by students was the perception that groups did not all get equal time with the professors (one mention in course evaluations, one mention in the student survey, two mentions in interviews). For example, Rebecca said: "Sometimes, we got less time in class than we wanted to go over it because both of you guys

were circulating and handling different things… I think just a little bit more evenness all around… the way that we have time with y'all."

Tension 5: Degree of Emphasis on Traditional Course Content vs. the Consulting Project

Our reflections also revealed that having such a large, important project can lead to tensions between the traditional course content and the project. Is the primary aim of the course to learn the traditional course content? Or to deliver an excellent project (and develop the attendant "real world skills")? While the two aims often work in concert, they sometimes result in tensions. For example, when recruiting clients, there is a tension in how tightly to shape the project to the explicit course aims versus being more accommodating to client's true interests. There is also a tension in how much the professor invests in recruiting clients (which can be very time-consuming) versus developing other elements of the course. Professors also face the question of how much "pre-work" to do ourselves to determine the project's potential viability versus using that time for other course preparation and not predetermining the project's direction. With daily class, the tension exists in how much time to devote to the project versus traditional course content; the same tension exists with allotting grading weights. Sometimes, completion of the project demands a skill we did not anticipate and may not be part of the traditional course content, such as in Lora Louise Broady's marketing course where she saw a need to engage in a series of creative exercises to help students ideate solutions for their client yet felt the tension of that time eating into time that could be spent on other course content. With the final product, a tension rises between spending time on the "real-world" skills of practicing and polishing the project versus spending time on deepening the application of traditional course concepts and honing the conclusions available from marrying those concepts with the facts of the project.

Student perspectives aligned with our reflections. In the student survey, 20% wished for more emphasis on the project, such as "I feel that it can be improved by spending more time on the project and less time on other things in class" (Response #19). The anonymous in-class survey and the course evaluations also showed similar trends, with 8% and 10% respectively noting tensions between the project and traditional course content, with most (but not all) wanting to spend more time on the project. One particular challenge we note is that because the project feels so important, it can be easy for students to dismiss other coursework as unimportant, even labeling it "busy work" in rare instances (2 respondents in the course evaluations).

Addressing Tensions

The five areas of tensions present educators with hard choices. We have experimented with ways to address the tensions and have reflected on which approaches appear to be more successful than others. Here we share (1) key success factors suggested by our reflections and the student and client data and (2) ideas for what we plan to try next.

Key Success Factors

Unsurprisingly, the key success factors that we identified in our reflection are consistent with generally accepted principles of effective pedagogy. We especially recommend four key success factors: (1) setting clear expectations, (2) building trust, (3) having a clear structure and organization, and (4) developing teamwork skills and roles.

First, our reflections showed that given the grand scope and dual-evaluation nature of the project, *setting clear expectations* is especially important with client consulting projects. Students are naturally worried about their grade and whether the client's reaction factors into their grade, so having clear guidelines is especially necessary. We have also found it important to continually negotiate expectations for project deliverables with the student team as the project progresses and client feedback sends them in different directions. Students especially need clarity about when to expect feedback on their work and how much feedback to expect. The expectations we set for ourselves as professors also matter: we have learned to emphasize "good enough" over perfection and strategically communicate that expectation with the students who need to hear it – the ones who have unreasonable expectations for themselves – and not with the students who could benefit from raising their own expectations. Setting client expectations is also important, and therefore we have a contract that all clients and students sign, specifying the time investment of both parties and how they will be in contact. Student responses reinforced the need to set clear expectations. From the survey responses, the one student who expressed general displeasure with the client consulting project attributed their displeasure specifically to unmet expectations: they worked many more hours on the project than they had expected to and were never contacted by the client for follow up after the course, as they had expected (Response #3).

Second, our reflections indicated that *building trust* is especially important. With every course, faculty ask students to expand themselves in ways that may seem scary and to trust the faculty member to help guide their growth. Our reflections revealed that the client consulting project makes such demands at an even higher level than many students have experienced. Most have never done a consulting project before and do not initially see how they could accomplish such a project or provide value on the compressed timeframe of the block. We ask the students to trust us that they can do so, with our support. Therefore, building trust is essential. To build trust, we set clear expectations as described previously. We work with the client to scope a project that is doable (and when we have failed at this, we have seen trust erode). We create early opportunities to show the students that we trust in their abilities and capacity to learn and that we will also back them up when needed. For example, we have students lead their initial meeting with the clients on the third day of the block and we are available to rescue them at the end of the meeting if things go awry. Interestingly, student responses did not focus on the concept of trust – neither in the positive or negative sense. A few students did mention appreciation of the support they had from their professor, including 10% of the responses to the student survey. We take this to mean that enough trust was present in the background that it did not need to be mentioned.

Third, we identified the importance of *having a clear structure and organization* for the course. The size and complexity of the projects and the fact that they are being completed at the same time as other coursework demands an extremely high level of structure and organization. Whenever possible, we offer the students templates and worksheets to help them prepare their work. For example, many of our students have never sent a professional email before and benefit from a template. For the Management projects, the deliverables include multiple distinct parts (a final presentation, a final report, and at least three appendices). Giving the students examples and instructions for each part along with interim deadlines helps them deliver. Student feedback supported our conclusions about the importance of structure and organization. Most students perceived the structure to be helpful and connected that fact to their

satisfaction with the project: "[The client consulting project] is the best part of the course…. the course was scaffolded in a way that made a massive project extremely manageable" (In-class anonymous survey, 2024 Fall Management, Response #51). On the other hand, the few students who did not appreciate the organization of the course felt the opposite, such as, "too unorganized for the amount of work" (course evaluation, Spring 2023, Response #12).

Fourth, *developing teamwork skills and roles* can support success, according to our reflections. We take great care in forming the teams using a comprehensive survey about students' preferences for topic, teammates, teammate availability, and for working ahead vs. on schedule. Students complete a 6-page team contract exercise specifying everything from roles to when they will meet, how they will resolve differences, and much more (for a copy, see the supplementary files linked previously). In the Management course, because the teams are very large (7-8 students) and the deliverables especially complex, we have the teams break into three sub-teams of 2-3 students for each sub-deliverable, as well as assigning 8 different roles, from client contact to technology specialist. Because teamwork is a topic in the Management course, we also engage in weekly reflective exercises (Gurtner et al., 2007; Schippers et al., 2007). We also include weekly anonymous feedback between teammates. Students affirmed the incredible value of teamwork skills and roles. For example, Issac noted in his interview, "I think the real strength of [the team] selection process was that the teams, at least for me team, felt incredibly cohesive." Additionally, many students have remarked to us that the team experience they had in the course was their best team experience ever.

What We Will Try Next: More Client Alignment

Based on our reflections and additional data from students and clients, we have targeted more client alignment for next iterations of the courses. We hope to make two changes. Specifically, at the start of the project, we would like to add a step to *reconfirm with the client the aim and deliverables* after the initial client meeting via a short email following a template we provide. Toward the end of the project, we will experiment with *checking in with the client when the project is 75% complete*, via a short meeting. When presented with this idea in the interviews and debriefs, all five students and all four clients supported the idea. We are trying the changes in the block currently running as we write this article.

Discussion

The present work investigated the benefits, challenges, tensions, and key success factors in client consulting projects on a 3.5-week block, using a mixed-methods approach centered on reflective case writing and supplemented by data from students and clients. Critically, we identified five areas of tensions: the dual-evaluation nature of the project (where both the professor and client are evaluating), the level of client engagement and alignment, scheduling and pacing, the level of professor guidance, and the degree of emphasis on traditional course content vs. the project.

Our research contributes to the limited knowledge at the intersection of two pedagogical subjects: block and intensive learning (Muscat & Thomas, 2023) and client consulting projects embedded in a class (as opposed to as a stand-alone practicum) (Kay et al., 2019). We expand on the recent work on intensive WIL by Winchester-Seeto, et.al (2024) by exploring the specific nature of the tensions from teaching client consulting projects on a 3.5-week block model as opposed to a semester system. For example, the 3.5-week block can heighten the tension of the

dual-evaluation nature of the project by increasing the pressure to please the client in a shorter time frame, giving little time for professors to redirect when clients give poor feedback, and leading to a hyperfocus on the project that results in an outsize desire to please the client, while also making the experience of pleasing a client a more realistic WIL experience, as noted by both clients and students. Similarly, the 3.5-week block affected the tensions around client engagement and alignment: the short timeframe heightened the stress students experienced around gaining alignment vs. getting started on the problem and made it harder for some clients to respond to students during our limited time. At the same time, some clients found our compressed time frame more conducive to partnering than a drawn-out semester system. Furthermore, the scheduling tension increases because the initial meeting has to be earlier than it would be on the semester system. The level of professor guidance must be more carefully monitored as students' midpoint worry hits a higher peak than it might on the semester system. One limitation to our conclusions about the 3.5-week block vs. the semester plan is that our investigation only considered a block format, and therefore we do not have data on client consulting projects on a semester, only conjecture.

For practitioners, the understanding of tensions gained through this research will position faculty for greater success with client consulting projects on the block. Through understanding, educators can make considered choices in how they address the tensions. Notably, we emphasize the word "address" – not "resolve." Tensions are a constant presence that teachers must address. Unsurprisingly, the tensions in the projects mirror the inherent tensions of consulting work in the real world. Knowing the tension areas, we also recommend that teachers share with their students directly about the tension areas and how the teacher chooses to address them, which may result in greater student appreciation and accommodation of the tensions as well as new ideas to address the tensions. While our research focused on business courses, we could see these learnings applied to almost any other field of study that has practical application, such as theatre (Daniel & Daniel, 2015), psychology (Hamilton et al., 2018), political science (Piper et al., 2023), or interdisciplinary fields (Hayes et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods approach centred on reflective case writing and supplemented by data from students and clients, we investigated the benefits, challenges, tensions, and key success factors in client consulting projects on the 3.5-week block. Benefits abound for all stakeholders: students, faculty, clients, and the school administration. Most salient are the benefits to students of real-world experience, increased motivation and sense of meaningfulness, and the chance to deepen their learning by applying course concepts. Challenges include the stress involved for the students and faculty with fitting the project into the block and pleasing the client, plus the time invested by faculty to make the projects happen. Overall, the major stakeholders – faculty, students, and clients – agreed that the benefits outweighed the challenges. Most importantly, client consulting projects on the block present five tensions: the dual-evaluation nature of the project, the level of client engagement and alignment, scheduling and pacing, the level of professor guidance, and the degree of emphasis on traditional course content vs. the project. Several keys to success include setting expectations, building trust, having clear structure and organization, and developing teamwork skills and roles.

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