



# Partnering to Create High Impact Teaching and Learning Practices: An Apprentice-Based Program that Inspires Authentic Engagement for All Learners

*by Bonnie Bechard and Thomas Fitzpatrick*

High impact teaching and learning practices inspire authentic engagement and deepen learning for students. “Authentic learning is a relatively new term that describes learning through applying knowledge in real-life contexts and situations” (Rule, 2007). The path toward developing a pedagogical approach that promotes meaningful engagement for learners starts with a teaching philosophy that emphasizes building a bridge between the classroom and the world. With this mindset we can offer students opportunities to connect theoretical concepts and skills to real-life problems and solutions. When we do this, students are engaged in “deeper learning—which means they are *using* their knowledge and skills in a way that prepares them for real life” (The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2014).

Our journey toward high impact practices started with smaller experiential learning opportunities such as a field assignment to interview a practicing manager or a scavenger hunt with a camera to capture the best and worst advertising. Over time it evolved into partnering with external organizations to provide students with more complex projects.

Several projects involved taking advantage of the discussion board in an online Learning Management System (LMS) to create interactive live cases. One class of students participated in a live case study with a government agency to promote tourism. Another assisted a small business owner in assessing a site location for expansion in a major city. A group of marketing students worked with a reality television program to develop their national brand. These high-impact practices helped students engage in “deep approaches” to learning which are important because “students who use these approaches tend to earn higher grades and retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates” (Kuh, 2008).

Before long we had created semester-long projects. By engaging in a large fundraising project and working with a nonprofit organization, students built a school in Afghanistan. Our students learned the process of foreign direct investment by participating in micro-financing through a non-governmental organization (NGO). The legacy project we started over a decade ago in the local community is The Common Man Apprentice Program. The remainder of the article tells our story of the innovative partnership we created with a New Hampshire-based company to create a high impact teaching and learning experience that has inspired authentic engagement and learning among hundreds of students. It represents engaged learning at its best and is an example of how a “capstone” experience or project can provide a culminating experience that integrates and applies what students have learned in other courses, which educational research has shown to increase rates of student retention and student engagement (Kuh, 2008).

### **The Common Man Apprentice Program**

The Common Man Apprentice Program is a semester-long project that engages students in the phases of developing a new product while competing against other teams of students. We wanted to partner with a company that had a strong presence in New Hampshire and also strong ties to our universities. In the start-up of this program Plymouth State University and Saint Anselm College partnered with The Common Man Family of Restaurants to create a product development “laboratory” for students. This hands-on learning opportunity gave students a chance to test their creativity, leadership, and decision-making skills as well as marketing knowledge in a collaborative environment. The assignment was modeled after the “Apprentice” program created with Toys R Us at Rivier University (2005, Fitzpatrick), where students created new product ideas that caught the attention of toy manufacturers. The success of this experience is what inspired the

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authors, a husband and wife team of professors, (Bechard and Fitzpatrick, 2006) to try out a similar learning experience for their students between their respective institutions at the time. We enlisted the help of Jason Lyon, The Common Man CEO and Plymouth State University alumnus. Jason was excited and about this hands-on learning opportunity and eager

to work with students as “apprentices,” learners who could learn from practical experience while being mentored by him. It would give them a taste of the “real” world so they could learn skills and abilities critical for success in the workplace and in their lives.

### **Getting Started with the Apprentice Assignment**

The first semester of The Common Man Apprentice began with a charge by the CEO that challenged students to create desserts that were not only tasty and profitable but that conformed to The Common Man’s menu, which was “home-style with a flair” (Jason Lyon, The Common Man CEO, 2006). The following parameters were established for the dessert competition:

- **Style:** “Home made, home-style.” Traditional New England comfort with flare that can be easily produced and executed with consistency providing value for The Common Man guest.
- **Prep Time:** No longer than one hour.
- **Service Execution Time:** No longer than four minutes.
- **Portion Size:** Eight inches of plate diameter.
- **Product Shelf Life:** Three – four days.
- **Product Cost:** \$1.23; 25% of food cost.
- **Retail Product Cost:** \$5.00.

The students then worked in teams going through the stages of team and product development. It is important to note that the teams participated in an ice breaker that helped them to form and to build cohesion among the team members. They generated product ideas from brainstorming, secondary research, and consumer feedback. The preliminary screening of product ideas was based on evaluating the extent to which they met the criteria of The Common Man and appealed to their target market. After the ideas were evaluated, each team tested their recipe and received feedback from a panel of judges composed of chefs and restaurant managers. Five teams were selected as finalists, which resulted in their products being placed on the restaurant menu of five different Common Man restaurants throughout New Hampshire for a two-week period to determine the most popular dessert based on actual sales. The competition culminated with a finalists’ reception where the students and their professors and families were invited to attend the awards ceremony. A cash award of \$500 from the two universities and an in-kind gift certificate from The Common Man was awarded to the winning team.

### **Evolution of the Apprentice Program**

We were ahead of our time as “engaged learning” and “high impact practices” were not yet popular terms. Reflecting back on the development of this classroom project and how it has grown, we would like to share how the program, now known as the “Taste of The Common Man,” has evolved to its current state and how it demonstrates eight characteristics of high quality, high impact teaching and learning practices (Kuh, 2008) that inspire authentic engagement for all learners.

### **Eight Characteristics of High Quality, High Impact Teaching and Learning Practices**

1. **Significant and meaningful time and effort on authentic, complex tasks over an extended period of time.** The specific charge has evolved to challenging students to develop a unique gourmet ice cream flavor for The Common Man Family of Restaurants. Students are responsible for the planning, execution, and evaluation of their product development as well as branding their business and promoting their product. The tasks of each apprentice (as shown below) have become more complex and include the steps that a real business would go through to develop and launch a new product:
  - Forming a team
  - Brainstorming product ideas
  - Conducting product research
  - Screening ideas through customer surveys
  - Researching the target market demographics
  - Analyzing the competition
  - Selecting product ingredients
  - Producing test-batch run
  - Taste tasting and refining recipe
  - Producing final batch run
  - Pricing and calculating breakeven
  - Branding and designing product label
  - Naming, promoting, and displaying product
2. **Partnering with business professionals.** Throughout the semester students have an opportunity to engage in meaningful working relationships with business professionals. The project begins with a visit from two Common Man Managers, who deliver the charge and introduce students to the company brand. Each team of students has an opportunity to go off campus to The Common Man Commissary twice during the semester to produce a test-batch run and final production run of ice cream.

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2. **Learning through real-world applications.** The results of The Common Man Apprentice project have been dramatic. Students consistently report that through the project they are learning what it is like to be in a ‘real world’ job. They recognize that they have to be goal oriented, keep a schedule, and meet deadlines. The hands-on experience of creating a new product requires the application of marketing principles, accounting concepts, communication practices, statistical techniques, and management skills. One of the authors (Fitzpatrick) has integrated the Apprentice project into his Marketing Principles course. By integrating what students have learned in other courses, the project creates a deep meaningful learning experience. The high level of learning demonstrated by students has resulted in both internship

opportunities and full-time employment for students who have successfully participated in The Common Man Apprentice.

3. **Fostering collaboration and team work.** Emphasizing the importance of building a strong team is essential to student success. One of the authors (Bechard) currently integrates the Apprentice program into her Organizational Behavior course. Building a strong team is dependent upon students discovering each others strengths and weaknesses; personality traits; diverse skills, abilities, and values as well as applying problem-solving skills; managing conflict; communicating effectively; and building involvement and trust among team members. The project also fosters a sense of shared purpose, high performance norms, and team empowerment and autonomy.
4. **Inspiring creativity, engagement, and love of learning.** By nature developing a new product requires creativity. In recent years the ice cream industry has seen an increase in innovative flavors. Students participating in the Apprentice program are challenged to create unique gourmet ice cream flavors. We have used the flavor profiles and culinary favorites of countries, great American cities, and the ‘local’ ingredients of New Hampshire to inspire new and exciting flavors. The product name and label must also be original. A significant portion of the project is devoted to creating a booth display similar to presenting at a tradeshow. The display must show creativeness and be eye appealing while incorporating accessories and elements that enhance its impact while staying within a \$25 budget. Students develop a passion for their product, which along with a winning mindset and motivation to “wow” the customers contribute to high levels of engagement and love of learning.
5. **Setting high performance expectations.** Students are expected to demonstrate high levels of professionalism in all aspects of their work. Their ice cream must taste and look good; it must have a rich, creamy consistency. A minimum of 50 surveys must be conducted for both pre-production and post-production. The boardroom presentation requires formal business attire, knowledge of product development as well as market research and demographics. All expenditures and costs must be accounted for.
6. **Providing rich feedback that goes beyond classroom assessment.** Working alongside managers of The Common Man and their professional chefs, students receive rich feedback on their performance. There are two formal milestones when students receive feedback. The first is the formal boardroom presentation mentioned above, and the second is the finale event of the program known as The Taste of The Common Man, which occurs two weeks before the end of the semester. This is the event at which students create their booth displays and are judged on their product. For both of these milestones, students receive feedback based on a detailed performance rubric. They also engage in peer- and self-evaluation both at the midterm and end of project term.
7. **Creating opportunities to publicly demonstrate competencies.** The Taste of The Common Man opens to the public after the student apprentices have been judged by the restaurant managers, chefs, and other business professionals. Approximately 300-400 people attend the competition, which includes not only the ice cream competition but also an iron chef competition using ingredients inspired by the ice cream flavors. The Common Man Family of Restaurants provide food samplings from their restaurants to round out the event. Students take create pride in having the opportunity to publicly demonstrate their semester-long efforts to create their product, booth display, and packaging design. It is rare to find an academic project that engages students but also engages so many members of the campus and the greater community including residents of the town, small business owners and bankers, and friends and family members. This

culminating experience, which captures the fruits of their labor, is what has helped create a love for the learning process and the popularity of the program. The proceeds of the event for each semester go to a local charity or help support student scholarships.

## **Concluding Reflections**

Seeking a strong business partner and deciding how to integrate an apprentice-based program into your curriculum are important considerations. The learning outcomes from this program are only possible because of the commitment and dedication of the entire Common Man Family to mentoring our students and providing the real-life context for creating an authentic learning experience. Setting clear expectations and performance criteria from the beginning of the project are necessary to ensure high levels of performance. Both the professor and business partners have the responsibility to coach and guide the students. Using professional chefs and restaurant managers for the ice cream judging and offering the product to the public give credibility to the project. Having professional videographers (Gadowski and Hart, 2013) available is useful in capturing teachable moments and building public relations. Students enjoy engaging in a competitive process and are motivated to work hard and have fun. While the awards and cash prizes add excitement, each student has the potential to come out a winner in a classroom apprentice-type project such as this one—learning invaluable lessons that will prepare the learner for real life.

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