As a member of the HR faculty, I think there is a key difference between "doing a project" and "learning through a project." The former is a transactional activity; the latter is a transformational experience that lies at the heart of professional growth. My job is not only to give a project, but to employ it as a rich tool for developing the key competencies necessary for every successful HR professional.

My View: Projects as a Practice Laboratory for Professional Development

Projects are essentially an experimental simulation of real life. In the classroom, a project permits me to step out of abstract ideas in a textbook and plunge students into the messiness, collaboration, and moral issues of professional work.

Building Core Competencies, Not Merely Knowledge: Although a project on "compensation structures" instructs a student in pay grades and market analysis, the actual learning occurs in the process. They build competencies such as problem-solving when their data are dirty, collaboration when they are working with disparate personalities, and communication when they are presenting their results to a "client." These are the soft skills that HR leaders are always looking for in prospective talent.

The Project as a Talent Pipeline: As an HR professional, I look at projects as a first filter for future talent pipeline. It's where I observe who shows resilience in the face of failures, who steps up in the absence of leadership, and who can get through conflict with poise. These are the strengths that make a student not only employable, but an asset to any organization in the future.

Linking Theory to Practice: An assignment compels students to take the theoretical concepts we learn in class—be it employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, or performance management—and use them to solve a real, multi-dimensional issue. It's there that they learn the real world is not structured in a framework; it demands flexibility and critical reasoning.

My Experience: The Journey is the Lesson

I usually explain to my students a shared experience with me throughout my teaching life. I'll give them a complicated project, say the design of a complete onboarding program for an imaginary company. A week into the project, one or more of them will approach me, complaining that they're not able to find a single definitive answer. They'll request a clear rubric and a step-by-step solution.

My answer is always the same: "The project isn't the final report; the project is the journey you're on right now." The actual lesson for that student is not so much in creating the program, but in figuring out how to source information outside the box, how to recover when their original idea bombs, and how to work with teammates who have varying ideas.

The student who originally thought of the project as a graded task comes to realize that the project is a live case study in his or her own career development. They find the most enduring lessons weren't the portions of their final report, but the frustrating moments they conquered and the collaborative epiphanies they reached. This is the kind of experiential learning that a textbook can never provide.

How I Encourage Learning through Projects

In order to get students to transition from "doing" to "learning," I have a couple of tactics:

Required Reflection: I require reflection as an essential part of the project grade. Students are required to submit a project journal or a post-mortem report in which they outline their difficulties, what they learned about teaming, and how they would approach things differently. This makes them reflectively process their experience.

Focus on the Process: I assure them from the very beginning that I am evaluating their process. I utilize rubrics that value collaboration, critical thinking, and flexibility as much as the end products.

Framing Failure as a Milestone:

I ask students to view setbacks as not a failure of the project but as an important milestone of learning. It's usually in those moments of adversity that the greatest insight is discovered