

Experiential learning and assessment in first-year undergraduate marketing units: An exploratory study

Tania von der Heidt, Southern Cross University

Abstract

The trend toward more active, experiential learning pedagogies has found increasing interest. With its emphasis on creating solutions to consumer problems, such as through the marketing plan, the marketing discipline offers an ideal context for these pedagogies. This paper examines the extent to which experiential learning assessments have been adopted in fifteen Australian universities' first year undergraduate marketing units within a Business program. Results of the analysis show that developing a marketing plan is the most commonly used experiential task to assess student learning outcomes. However, the relative contribution of these assessments is low. Further, only in half of cases does it involve collaborative learning. More emphasis on carefully designed experiential learning and assessment is suggested as a means to achieve more employable graduates.

Key words: marketing education, experiential learning, group work, oral presentation, marketing plan, assessment, graduate attributes

The case for experiential learning

A gap exists between learning marketing and the practice of marketing in the workforce (Pharr & Morris 1997). This is reflected in employer-reported graduate skill deficiencies including a lack of creativity and flair, oral business communication skills, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills and a lack of understanding of business practice (ACNielsen Research Services 2000). Pressure from employers, government and accreditation bodies to narrow this gap is growing (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business 2007; Floyd & Gordon 1998).

Within marketing education, researchers have proposed the use of experiential activities to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Fontczak 1998). The concept of experiential learning has been discussed in the psychology and education literature for some time (e.g. Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). It represents a philosophical orientation in teaching and learning that prizes 'learning by doing' to maximise learning (Sakofs 1995). As a participatory method of learning (Feinstein, Mann & Corsun 2002; Hoover & Whitehead 1976), the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied (Keeton & Tate 1978) and can combine direct experience with reflection and analysis (Joplin 1995). In this way, experiential learning increases students' self-efficacy (Pollack & Lilly 2008) and connects them with the business community (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker 2001), providing a gentle transition from student to practitioner (Fulcher & Paull 2009). Several marketing educators have argued strongly for the use of experiential learning projects - often in teams - such as marketing plans (Goodnight, Elam & Russell 2008), live business cases (Dommeyer 1986; Elam & Spotts 2004; Fulcher & Paull 2009; Kennedy, Lawton & Walker 2001), client-based projects (de los Santos & Jensen 1985; Humphreys 1981; Lopez & Lee 2005), service learning (Finsterwalder, O'Steen & Tuzovic 2009; Shaw 2007) and action research study involving photo essays (Ng 2006) in the business curriculum.

Such experiential learning projects provide a rich, open-ended learning environment that fosters the development of graduate attributes, such as critical thinking and problem solving skills and interpersonal skills through group work (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker 2001; Lang & Dittrich 1982). Hence, experiential learning is consistent with a deep approach to learning, as opposed to surface or strategic learning approaches (Munn 2003). As students engage in this deep approach, they begin to relate their learning to previous learning as well as their own personal experiences, thus continuously building and strengthening the scaffolding (Biggs 1994). Experiential learning is enhanced through multiple pedagogies to engage students, particularly with our increasingly varied student populations (Gaff 1992), and through experimentation with innovative approaches to the 'experience of learning' (Mellor 1991). When assessment incorporates the graduate attributes, the student will also be more likely to utilise deep learning strategies and the achievement of these attributes can be verified to employers (Munn 2003).

While experiential learning has a number of proponents among Australian marketing educators (e.g. Finsterwalder, O'Steen & Tuzovic 2009; Fulcher & Paull 2009), there is little published literature on the contribution of experiential learning to overall assessment of marketing units. As effective assessments provide stimulus for learning (Dean & Cowley 2009; Lizzio & Wilson 2004), a clear understanding of current assessment practices is important. This paper attempts to provide some initial insights into the mix of assessments,

including those involving experiential learning (including marketing plans and group work) in Australian universities' first-year marketing units.

Methodology

To inform this research objective, recent and sufficiently detailed unit statements of first-year marketing unit offerings in Australian university business programs were required. These were sourced from students' advanced standing applications to the author's university, as well as online. The author obtained unit statements with adequate information on graduate attributes, teaching and assessment from 15 of Australia's 37 public universities. The unit statements were content-analysed in relation to assessment mix (e.g. exam, marketing plan, essay) and experiential learning through group work and/or oral presentations.

Profile and comparison of sample universities

This section highlights the diversity of the 15 universities on a range of characteristics sampled, suggesting they are broadly representative of Australian universities. The different resourcing and performance characteristics of the sample universities are presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. These are important to understand because they will affect what instructors can do in terms of experiential learning assessment tasks and course design. As shown in Table 1, nearly one-third (32.5%) of undergraduate students in Australia are enrolled in Business courses. Yet academic staff numbers in the Management and Commerce discipline group account for an average of only 10.5% of equivalent full-time academic staff. This means that the share of business students enrolled at Australian universities is on average three times greater than the share of business academics assigned to teaching the discipline. The two universities which most closely match student share with share of academics (ratio of 1.4) are Swinburne University and SCU. By contrast, UQ has the highest ratio of student share to share of academics (3.9).

Table 1 Business academics and students at sample universities (2005)

| University | Undergrad. student load in Business, in % share | Academic staff numbers in M&C (% share of FTE) | Student share to academic share for Business |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Canberra Uni. | 44.9 | 19.7 | 2.3 |
| Central Queensland Uni. (CQU) | 43.4 | 13.3 | 3.3 |
| Curtin Uni. | 42.8 | 14.9 | 2.9 |
| Griffith Uni. | 38.7 | 16.6 | 2.3 |
| James Cook Uni. (JCU) | 21.2 | 7.4 | 2.9 |
| Macquarie Uni. | 54.5 | 17.1 | 3.2 |
| Newcastle Uni. | 17.2 | 6.3 | 2.7 |
| Queensl. Uni. of Techn. (QUT) | 31.3 | 12.1 | 2.6 |
| Southern Cross Uni. (QUT) | 42.2 | 29.4 | 1.4 |
| Swinburne Uni. | 38.0 | 27.3 | 1.4 |
| Tasmania Uni. | 22.6 | 6.0 | 3.8 |
| Uni. of Queensland (UQ) | 22.4 | 5.8 | 3.9 |
| Uni. of South Australia (UniSA) | 27.9 | 16.4 | 1.7 |
| Uni. of Western Sydney (UWS) | 33.5 | 15.1 | 2.2 |
| Wollongong Uni. | 31.7 | 11.0 | 2.9 |
| National average | 32.5 | 10.5 | 3.1 |

(Adapted from University of Melbourne 2007)

The specialisation index provided in Table 2 reflects the scope of the sample's university offerings among ten discipline areas, with the most specialised university scoring 100. It is desirable that performances take account of the scope of an institution (University of

Melbourne 2007). The scope-adjusted teaching and learning performance in terms of undergraduate student satisfaction for the sample lies within a relatively narrow band, ranging from 79.9% (Central Queensland University, CQU) to 93.7% (for SCU). Another teaching and learning indicator, entrance score, shows more dispersion. Within the sample, Macquarie University attracts top students (98.9) while SCU students' have the lowest entrance scores (69.7).

The total research performance is measured as a simple average of seven research attributes (including publications, citations, grants and doctoral completions). Considerable dispersion of scores is evident in our sample. Top research performer, UQ scored 23 times higher than poorest performer, CQU, 11 times higher than SCU and approximately 3 to 5 times higher than other sample universities. The index of international standing in Table 2 combines the results for research and teaching, adjusting for scope. It shows that universities in the sample were spread across the field. Three universities in the sample are AACSB accredited.

Table 2 Performance of sample universities (2005)

| | Specialisation index | Total research# | Teaching & learning#: Undergraduate student satisfaction | Teaching & learning #: Entrance score | Rank in international standing# | AACSB (2010) accredited |
|-----------|----------------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Canberra | 59.9 | 4.0 | 86.5 | 86.4 | 27 | X |
| CQU | 40.4 | 3.5 | 75.6 | 83.7 | 36 | X |
| Curtin | 20.6 | 15.6 | 87.2 | 91.1 | 17 | X |
| Griffith | 25.0 | 22.8 | 86.8 | 86.1 | 14 | √ |
| JCU | 19.4 | 10.4 | 89.7 | 84.0 | 24 | X |
| Macquarie | 54.4 | 24.2 | 87.5 | 96.8 | 9 | X |
| Newcastle | 22.6 | 21.8 | 84.0 | 87.9 | 13 | X |
| QUT | 27.4 | 28.2 | 84.1 | 90.1 | 10 | √ |
| SCU | 48.8 | 7.1 | 93.7 | 69.7 | 27 | X |
| Swinburne | 76.3 | 9.3 | 93.3 | 79.4 | 26 | X |
| Tasmania | 23.5 | 17.9 | 86.3 | 84.3 | 14 | X |
| UQ | 30.2 | 82.1 | 86.6 | 95.6 | 4 | √ |
| UniSA | 35.6 | 16.1 | 84.7 | 78.7 | 20 | X |
| UWS | 28.5 | 16.4 | 80.4 | 71.0 | 24 | X |
| Wollong. | 35.3 | 20.0 | 96.4 | 88.0 | 11 | X |

(University of Melbourne 2007) # scope-adjusted * <http://www.australian-universities.com/rankings/>

Results: Assessment mix

The results are presented in Table 3 in terms of three major assessment types - exam, marketing plan and other. Four key findings are noteworthy. Firstly, exams are the most common form of learning assessment. All 15 universities' marketing units assess learning outcomes through examinations. Exam weightings range from 30% to 100%, with an average of 60% contribution to assessment mix. Secondly, the majority of universities sampled (9) assess learning through a single method (UQ) or two methods only (8). All three universities with AACSB accreditation belong to this category. Only six universities assess using three or more assessment methods. Thirdly, the most popular experiential learning assessment is the marketing plan. Nine of the universities sampled assess students learning outcomes through a marketing plan project of some description – either in part or in full – with weighting ranging from 20% to 35%. The remaining five universities without a marketing plan assessment have non-exam projects involving case study or critical essays, which also account for 20% to 35% of marks. Group work features as the next most common experiential learning assessment. Eight universities' marketing courses involve group work, mostly through a marketing plan (7) or through another major assessment (1). By contrast, six universities rely wholly on

individual student effort in gauging learning outcomes. Lastly, assessment through oral presentations, a third main form of experiential learning, is undertaken in less than half of the universities (7).

Table 4 Major assessments in first-year marketing units for Business degree

| | Exams | | Marketing plan | | Other major | |
|-----------|-------|--------|--|--------|--|--------|
| | Year | Weight | Topic | Weight | | Weight |
| Canberra | 2008 | 50% | Full plan for new business. Some choice, in groups | 25%^ | Industry briefing (ind.) | 15% |
| CQU | 2007 | 80% | Full plan for single existing product. Limited choice, individual | 20% | - | - |
| Curtin | 2008 | 40% | Full plan for single existing product of student choice, in groups | 35% | Tutorial exercise (ind) | 15% |
| Griffith* | 2009 | 65% | Full plan for single existing product with limited choice, in groups | 35% | - | - |
| JCU | 2006 | 60% | Full plan for existing business with some choice, in groups | 25% | Tutorial exercises | 15%^ |
| Macquarie | 2008 | 80% | None | - | Essay (group) | 20% |
| Newcastle | 2009 | 35% | Situation analysis for existing business of student choice, in groups | 25%^ | Infoskills report (ind.) | 15% |
| QUT* | 2010 | 70% | Analysis of key strategic elements, individual and groups | 30%^ | - | - |
| SCU | 2010 | 30% | Evaluation of marketing mix of two existing organisations of student choice, in groups | 30% | Critical essay and presentation (ind.) | 40%^ |
| Swinburne | 2010 | 65% | None | - | Project (ind.) | 35%^ |
| Tasmania | 2007 | 60% | None | - | Case and essay (ind.) | 30% |
| UQ* | 2007 | 100% | None | - | - | - |
| UniSA | 2010 | 50% | None | - | Critical essay (ind) | 20% |
| UWS | 2010 | 50% | Full plan for existing single product with some choice, in groups | 25%^ | Tutorial exercises (ind.) | 25% |
| Wollong. | 2008 | 70% | None | - | Creative brief (ind.) | 30% |

* AACSB accredited ^ Includes oral presentation component

Discussion and conclusion

The uptake of marketing plans as the key experiential learning assessment in introductory marketing courses by two-thirds of universities sampled is encouraging, as it reflects a recognition of the importance of experiential learning assessment. However, the weighting of marketing plans (where used) is generally only one-half that of the primary assessment type - the exam. Further, the finding that only one-half of the universities studied assessed collaborative learning is of concern. Teaching students how to work collaboratively at undergraduate level is the single most important factor in ensuring the development of other, associated graduate skills and abilities, not only at university but also during work placement and employment (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini 2004). Likewise, the low representation of oral presentation assessments is noteworthy. Oral presentation skills are important because they enable all business students to demonstrate higher levels of cognitive thinking and development (Kerby & Romine 2009; Maes, Weldy & Icenogle 1997; Ulinski & O'Callaghan 2002).

Our strong focus on examination success and on the summative rather than the formative role of assessment, especially in AACSB-accredited institutions, results in a preponderance of didactic teaching and passive learning (Kember & Leung 2005). Certainly, it is easier to inform rather than to impart the skill necessary to become a good marketer: Information is objective and consistent across learners, situations and time frames, whereas marketing skills

depend to some extent on the disposition and personal attributes of the students (McIntyre 1993). However, the tendency to underweight experiential assessment runs counter to most pedagogical thinking (Jones 2002). A key characteristic of assessments for deep learning and development of graduate attributes is to encourage divergent rather than convergent outcomes (Scouller 1998; Tang 1994) and to sample student capacity to synthesise and analyse (James 2002). Students should have the opportunity to demonstrate their individuality rather than striving toward a single correct (teacher-centred) answer (Brown 1996). These skills are best nurtured in students through experiential learning assessments. By contrast, this exploratory study finds that opportunities for Australian business students to undertake substantial experiential learning projects remain limited in early marketing courses. As exams tend to further the adoption of surface learning strategies (Scouller 1998; Tang 1994), it is questionable whether lecture-based instruction and examination-centric assessment will foster in graduates of business schools not only the knowledge of a sound education but also independent thinking and competent problem solving, as is expected of them (Lang & Dittrich 1982). The risk is that if we do not adequately nurture these higher-order skills in our first year students, they may not successfully progress from novice to advanced levels by course completion (Kerby & Romine 2009).

There may be several reasons why experiential learning is not used more in first-year Australian marketing units. James (2002) contends that the inherent conservatism in universities is a major inhibitor to the renewal of assessment. Even when academics want to design engaging pedagogy with the use of experiential assessment, they face a range of impediments. These include large class sizes, heightened academic workloads, multiple delivery modes and modes of student participation (James 2002), as well as diverse student cohorts. Other factors are the high share of students to academics and a stronger focus on research (than teaching) outcomes, as shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. This is illustrated by a comparison between the highest- and lowest-ranking universities in the sample – UQ and SCU. AACSB-accredited UQ's wholly examination-driven assessment is a function of the lowest resourcing of academics for business students and the pursuit (and achievement) of top research performance. While UQ's students are among the top in the country (in terms of entrance score), it is doubtful whether they experience deep learning approaches in the introductory marketing course. Conversely, SCU is the university with the lowest exam weighting and the most balanced multi-method assessment, including a collaborative experiential learning project. SCU has the highest share of business academics to students, the highest undergraduate student satisfaction, yet one of the poorest research performance indices and the lowest entrance scores. These results highlight that research and teaching are very different kinds of activities and that good performance in one often competes with good performance in the other (Vroom 2007).

Clearly, there are issues in designing and managing experiential learning activities, which need to be acknowledged and addressed. For instance, the extent to which realism helps or hinders learning is directly related to the complexity, closure, validity and visibility of information (Gunz 1995). It follows that capacity building of marketing educators as well as an institutional mindset shift may be needed to encourage the uptake of innovative and experiential pedagogical tools necessary to develop competent marketing graduates. A number of experiential learning models exist to help guide marketing educators through the challenging, but worthwhile process. Through the careful development of such assessments, students can engage in more active learning that enhances critical thinking and creativity skills as well as builds on existing knowledge and, ultimately, improves their employability and ability to contribute more to society.

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