Experiential Learning in Marketing Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study describes an approach to experiential learning within the marketing degree at Victoria University. Early indications suggest that this approach to learning can result in improved class attendances, improvements in the quality of written work and notably increased levels of self-reliance.

Background

Higher education is in transition. Australian universities face many new challenges as the number and complexity of reporting structures undergoes yet another revision. The impending Research Quality Framework and Teaching and Learning Fund all have implications for resource allocation and teaching policies (KPA Phillips Consultants 2006).

The challenges must be faced in an uncertain and often hostile environment. Popular media has fuelled a growing public debate over falling standards, the prevalence of cheating, soft marking and a general "dumbing down" of curriculum. (Donnelly 2004; Laurie 2003; Rushworth and Davis 2003a; Rushworth and Davis 2003b). Both government and employer groups have criticized business education for failing to prepare graduates with skills necessary to operate in a knowledge based economy (Business Council of Australia 2006; DEST 2002; Kelly 2003). Employers rightly demand graduates who are self-directed learners possessing well-honed skills in the areas of critical evaluation, oral and written communication, problem solving and analysis and the flexibility to adapt to changing industry environments (Cooper and Lee 2000; Gray, Whiten, and Knightbridge 2002; Wee, Kek, and Kelley 2003).

For their part, students' expectations are also changing. Particularly evident is a consumerist attitude to education, demanding the right to be passive, ad hoc learners (James 2001). This mindset manifests itself in rote learning, a "content focus" (Cooper and Lee 2000; Wee et al. 2003) combined with a desire to be "hand-held" (Castleberry 2001). In short, many students view higher education as a commodity rather than a process. Academics are all too often dismayed by the disjuncture between their expectations and those of learners.

Amid these conflicting challenges, many academics feel that they are walking a tightrope. Expected to deliver subjects that are have both personal and industry relevance, academics endeavour to package them in innovative and entertaining ways while simultaneously allowing the flexibility to accommodate different learning styles. All this must be accomplished with an eye on quality outcomes and cost efficiency.

These challenges are keenly felt within Victoria University (VU). Labelled as a "new university" or "second-tier" university, VU was established in 1990. It is a dual-sector university located in Melbourne's western suburbs where unemployment rates are particularly high. Internal research indicates that VU is the most multi-cultural educational institution in the land, with more than 90 languages spoken, and has the highest proportion of first generation university students, many of whom come from low socio-economic families.

Victoria University's student population exhibits a distinctive culture. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have lower levels of confidence along with unrealistic expectations about university life. In addition, paid work assumes a very high priority (James 2002). They are street savvy and know how to use the system to their advantage. In general, many are unprepared for the intellectual demands and time commitments imposed by higher education. Marketing students, in particular, exhibit a learning style that emphasises a short- term orientation, preference for functionality, immediate relevance and concrete experience (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis 2000).

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning (EL), with its emphasis on procedural skills appears to offer a great deal of potential as a useful approach in marketing education. EL takes learners through four stages of a learning cycle; concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. EL is flexible enough to offer value for a range of learning styles (Kolb et al. 2000). Both academics and employers agree that an emphasis on process-based skills has greater long-term value (Cooper and Lee 2000; Peters 2000).

Although the concept of EL is well understood, its implementation is extremely varied. For some, EL simply means setting projects involving a real world organisation (Lizzio 2004; Peters 2000). For others imvolves the use of simulation games (Smith and Doren 2004) or a case study approach (Elam and Spotts 2004).

EL has met with resistance from both academics and undergraduates (Lizzio 2004; Smith and Doren 2004). Explanations for academic resistance include: that the practical limitations of the traditional lecture/tutorial delivery mode, large class sizes, costly implementation and lengthy time-frames (Lizzio 2004; Mitchell 1993).

Implementing EL at Victoria University

Our decision to integrate EL into a core marketing subject, built on experimental work carried out over a number of years. Our plan was to integrate EL into all aspects of the program – lectures, tutorials and assessments. This was a major challenge since the literature suggests that few programs have successfully integrated EL across all delivery modes (Lizzio 2004). As an applied level two unit, Advertising and PR appeared to provide fertile ground for an experiential approach. A second level unit attracting large enrolments, the subject builds on the introductory marketing studies. By second year, learners were expected to display a combination of conceptual and procedural skills. Yet, for some time, it had been clear to staff that relatively few students appeared to make this transition competently.

Indeed, our experience in this subject was that standards had been falling for some time. The usual litany of problems were evident. Attendances had declined sharply since the late 1990s. By 2004, fewer than 30% of enrolled students were attending lectures regularly. Although tutorial attendance was marginally higher, absenteeism rates were alarming. Poor attendance rates were reflected in poor quality assignments and increasing failure rates. In addition, absenteeism also placed excessive demands on staff for out of hours tuition.

The prevailing attitude among the student population was that assignments were simply "hurdle requirements" that had little bearing on the real world. Plagiarism and collusion were so rife that the University's Disciplinary Committee was unable to process the volume of reported cases. Transcripts of Disciplinary hearings underlined the depth of the problem. A "cut and paste" mentality prevailed. Anecdotal evidence, in the form of students' candid comments, reinforced this:

> Lecturers just don't understand the modern approach to report-writing. You get a bit of content from here and a bit of content from there and you slap it together. The sooner lecturers understand this, the better off we will be! (Student, 2002)

This quote appeared to echo a broader attitude that undergraduates saw themselves as "content compilers" rather than "content creators" or "problem-solvers". Many academics interpreted this as a sign that undergraduates had disengaged from the learning process. More importantly, it was clear that learners were failing to demonstrate core skills of critical analysis, application and problem-solving.

Subject Design

Our response became known internally as "Fightback." Subject design was based on a pragmatic assumption that assessment drives learning. This insight led us to examine the assessment tasks first, identify the requisite skills required to complete them and anchor the entire program around these skills. In developing a range of EL activities, our guiding philosophy was to demystify skills, ensure practical relevance and integrate them across the lecture/tutorial format.

Assessment

Historically, the major assessment task required students working in teams, to prepare a communications plan for a client-organisation. The preparation of a plan requires students to demonstrate a diverse range of skills and make a variety of decisions from segmenting a market through to evaluating media and promotional alternatives. Given that these themes are drawn from the entire curriculum, there were no compelling reasons to change the broad thrust of the assignment task. The communications plan, then, became the organizing framework for subject design.

A major objective was to minimise students' content focus and eradicate plagiarism. Accordingly, we sought to reduce their reliance on web-based sources. Instead, we provided students with a briefing kit consisting of a written brief along with market research in the form of raw, unanalysed data tables primarily from Roy Morgan's Single Source Survey. The literature suggests that student resistance can be ameliorated through practical relevance (Lizzio 2004). To encourage learners to "buy" into relevance, we "sold" the idea that both the briefing kit was comparable to that used by industry practitioners.

Past experience suggested students found the assignment to be daunting. Accordingly, another decision was taken to break it down into two components, one of which formed the basis of an individual task (a consumer profile) and a team-based task (the media plan). Again we "sold" them on the notion that the first assignment was one section of the final report. Thus is it provided an opportunity to engage in "process writing" where they skills could be rehearsed and early feedback on performance would be provided

Lectures

In spite of their limitations, the lecture format is a cost efficient means of disseminating information and is a standard delivery mode in higher education. To overcome absenteeism, we reasoned that we needed to provide students with compelling reasons to attend. Furthermore, the inclusion of EL activities provides academic staff with one mechanism for gauging how learners are experiencing subject content (Brookfield 2002). Our plan was to reduce time devoted to the substantive lecture program in order to make way for a range of EL exercises. Clearly these would only benefit those students who were physically present during the lecture. Each two-hour lecture was divided into four distinct, yet inter-related parts: (1) Substantive Conceptual Lecture (2) Skills Program (3) Lecture Based Experiential Activity (4) Live demonstrations

Skills Program: The underlying philosophy for the skills program was "learning to learn". Specific areas of weakness were addressed and a short 10-15 minute presentation was prepared and locked into relevant weeks of the lecture program. Examples include: basic desk research techniques, critical thinking, strategic use of the Internet, report structure and graphical representation in business reports.

Live Demonstrations: The objective for live demonstrations was to provide some "hot action" with clear industry relevance. We searched for demo disks and online wizards that provided much-needed links between the substantive lecture, the assessments and the skills program. Demos included; live media buys, proprietary segmentation software and manipulating census data in Excel. The nature of the material covered in live demonstrations meant that it could not be disseminated electronically. Given its immediate relevance to assignments, we anticipated that students would view it as a "bonus" exclusively available to those who attended.

Experiential Activities: Lecture based EL activities were carefully crafted so that they could be conducted in no more than 10 minutes. Each activity was designed to provide practical exposure to some of the more abstract concepts covered in the lecture program. At least two activities were developed for each weekly lecture topic. Examples of lecture-based activities include: using unaided recall tests to distinguish between brand recognition and brand recall, identifying patterns in creative campaigns, developing a TV buying strategy given TARPs for specific market segments. Lecture based EL activities were frequently supported with handouts, which we anticipated would become another "bonus" exclusively available to those who actively participated in lectures. The inclusion of EL activities in the lecture program was designed to underscore the applied nature of the subject while simultaneously setting the scene for tutorial work.

Tutorials

The tutorial program had always been the main forum for EL activities. However, major redesign issue was to develop a sufficient activities to cover every week of the program. The current tutorial program canvasses three meta-themes:
1) Profiling Customers Using Proprietary Research and Census Data
2) Evaluating Media Using Media Research Using Cost efficiency, reach and frequency
3) Evaluating Creative Work Using Design Principles

The first two parts of the program specifically addressed numeracy, which had previously been identified as a major weakness. Instructions to tutors to provide basic instruction on three issues: how to interpret market and media research, how to present findings in a business report and how to use their insights to solve problems. With this basic instruction, students solved a series of structured mini problems in each tutorial. As far as practical, these problems mimicked the types of problems as well as the types of data that would be encountered in the preparation of the assignments, and by implication in the workplace. A key teaching platform was that "mistakes"

were allowed, even normal. However, learners were encouraged to reflect on mistakes to learn how they might approach the problem differently. Tutorials, then, provided a forum for practicing skills on relatively simple and tightly structured problems, while developing the confidence to cope with similar, albeit more complex problems, as the semester progressed.

The literature suggests that experiential learning is more successful when learners have engaged in some preparation prior to class (Peterson 2001) as well as the opportunity for reflection following the concrete experience (Peters 2000 Kolb, 2000). Accordingly, we attempted to provide both opportunities through a series of questions; preparation questions to be completed prior to class and reflective questions to be completed after class. To ensure that students completed this work, it contributed towards overall subject assessment. The entire program was encapsulated in a tutorial workbook, which contained the questions, outlines of the experiential exercises along with tips and ideas for assignment preparation.

Results

Although we had experimented with EL in the past, this year represents the first time that it was deployed in a holistic manner and integrated across all delivery modes. Quantitative and qualitative indications are that the approach has delivered some of the desired outcomes.

Firstly, attendance at both lectures and tutorials has improved dramatically. Lecture attendance, measured by simple head counts, indicates that approximately 85% of students regularly attended this year, more than double the attendance rates of past semesters. Secondly, students appeared to have become more self-reliant as evidenced by a decrease in the number of phone calls and emails to staff asking questions about issues that had been covered in class. Thirdly, the standard of written work has improved. Staff involved in subject delivery all reported improvements in the standard of written work, notably increased levels of analytical thinking along with attempts to identify real insights. This more analytical approach made for a direct contrast to the mechanical reporting styles observed in the past. Quantitative analysis of results confirmed that overall grades on the major assignment had improved. Mean scores on assignments increased by 6 percentage points, as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that while tutors reported improved analysis in written work, more needs to be done to encourage learners to take the next step and use their insights in problem-solving.

Table 1 Comparison of Assignment Results		
	Semester 1, 2005	Semester 1, 2006
Number of enrolments	164	135
Mean Score	62.9	69.4

Significant at 0.01

Why did It Work?

Clearly many explanations may be advanced to account for the observed changes. An important consideration is that the provision of a briefing kit simplified the assessment task. It meant that learners did not need to devote time to locating relevant information. More importantly, it forced a realisation that research competency means more than simply "locating information." Rather than being assessed on factual content, the task's structure placed the spotlight on data analysis.

Learners intuitively understood that everyone had access to the same data set, so that to be competitive, they needed to use the data in innovative ways.

Another important aspect of the program was that it focussed on process rather than solutions. Subject delivery, with its emphasis on using information to solve problems cast tutorials into a place where mistakes were treated as normal. This allowed students to develop confidence in their abilities as problem solvers.

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