

HOW TO INCREASE THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF MID-TERMS AND FINALS

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ABSTRACT

Observing that students assigned low value to traditional essay questions exams, a Marketing instructor investigated alternatives. The conclusion was that exams based on the *Authentic Learning* concept might lead to higher evaluations. The resulting exams asked students to define the jobs they would hold 7 to 10 years out and to show how designated marketing concepts might be applied to increase their (or their employers') success. Quantitative and anecdotal evidence point to improved evaluations. A side benefit is that the new exams make for more interesting reading for the instructor than the traditional exams.

WHY CHANGE THE EXAMS?

In teaching the core Marketing course in the MBA program at Pace University, I gave Mid-term and Final exams consisting of essay questions similar to the discussion questions appearing at the ends of chapters in many Marketing text-books. Over the years, I became aware of several problems:

1. It was not at all clear to me or to the students that they derived any benefit from the exams, aside from fulfilling the requirements of the core course.

2. On course evaluation surveys, the exams received low ratings compared to other components of the course. My concern was that the ratings of the exams were pulling down the ratings for the course and thereby impacting negatively on my merit increases.

Comments that students offered, orally and on surveys pointed to a possible solution to this problem. Many students said that since they were not majoring in Marketing they did not see

much benefit in learning all that "Marketing stuff." In one respect they were right. Upwards of 90% of the students majored in Accounting, Finance, Computer Science and Taxation. Regarding the second point, in my opinion, they were partially wrong and partially right. They were wrong in saying that the Marketing stuff was not important for them. However, they were probably right in saying that they did not really understand how the Marketing stuff could help them. The challenge to me was to make the textbook appear to be relevant to many students who were not majoring in Marketing.

THE LITERATURE SEARCH

After some literature search, I decided to use the *Authentic Learning* approach in restructuring the Mid-term and Final exams.

Some distinctions may be useful. In traditional teaching, the focus is on students' acquisition of facts and theories (content). The principal teaching method is lecture, possibly enhanced with discussion and audio-visual aids. *Experiential Learning* creates a more active role for students through case discussions, role-playing and simulations. The aim is still to convey content but make it more memorable by increasing student involvement.

Authentic Learning differs from traditional and experiential methods in that the primary objective is not conveying content but creating learning experiences that are as close as possible to experiences that students encounter in real life. The emphasis is not on acquisition of facts and theories but on increasing students' ability to perform tasks that are valuable to employers and/or to the students themselves. The teacher's role is changed but not diminished. Instead of lecturing, the teacher provides direction, structure, guidance and standards.

Based on these distinctions, it seemed reasonable to expect that non-Marketing majors would obtain (and report) more value from exams based on the Authentic Learning concept. Let us see what specific suggestions and ideas are provided by the literature.

Ricks (1994) is a strong advocate of the authentic learning approach. He asserts that each event that displays the superiority of the teacher threatens learning. Each event that demonstrates the success of the learner makes the learning permanent. In his 1997 paper, he concludes that people who have done a task well and have told others how they did it are nearing skills mastery while people who have been shown or told or "made aware" have not even taken the first step to mastery.

Gordon (1998) defines three types of authentic learning:

- a) Academic challenges: Students produce a paper or a presentation assigned by the instructor.
- b) Scenario challenges: Students make believe that they were hired by a business firm or a government agency to study a situation and to present a plan for solving a problem.
- c) Real-life problems: Students examine a real situation and prepare a plan for solving a problem or achieving an objective.

Cronin (1993) offers suggestions for realizing the potential of authentic learning:

- a) Do not expect complete authenticity.
- b) Exploit available opportunities for authentic learning. Even traditional textbooks contain suggestions for authentic learning assignments.
- c) Start with less complex tasks.
- d) Keep it simple: students' experiences in school should resemble the experiences they encounter in their lives.

I decided that I would design the new exams on the (a) concept suggested by Gordon: students produce a paper assigned by the instructor and I would accept less than complete authenticity and that I would keep it simple, as suggested by Cronin. However, from the point of view of the students' education, a major change would take place. The exams, instead of just being attempts to measure what they had learned, would be valuable experiences in and of themselves. I expected that the students would perceive that and would recognize the higher value of the exams.

THE AUTHENTIC LEARNING MID-TERM AND FINAL EXAMS

The assignment for the new Mid-term and Final exams which are take-home exams, is to study the textbook and to think creatively about applying the concepts presented in the book to real business situations which they might encounter in their business careers. The actual exam assignment follows:

Make an assumption about your position 7-10 years from now. Examples might be: partner in an accounting (or consulting) firm, vice-president in a business or non-profit organization, owner of your business or another management position.

State clearly at the beginning of your paper what you are projecting this future position to be. Write an essay showing how you would perform (or recommend performing) each of the following marketing tasks in your business, the first 8 for the Mid-Term and the second 8 for the final.

For each essay, review the appropriate chapter(s) in the Kotler and Armstrong textbook and use as many as possible of the **Key Terms** listed at the ends of the chapters. In your paper, print the key terms you use in boldface to make it easier for the reader to evaluate your work. Make absolutely sure that you understand the **Key Terms** and that you are using them correctly.

Mid-Term

1. Developing marketing strategies.
2. Responding to the company's environment.
3. Using marketing research.
4. Applying customer behavior concepts.
5. Segmenting markets. Selecting target markets. Positioning your product or service.
6. Developing new products and services.
7. Managing the product over its life cycle.
8. Pricing your products or services.

Final

1. Using advertising.
2. Using sales promotion.
3. Using public relations (differentiate between PR and advertising).
4. Using personal selling.
5. Using direct and online marketing.
6. Creating a competitive advantage.
7. Building customer relationships.
8. Engaging in global marketing.

I grade the exam papers on the basis of adherence to the instructions, amount and quality of work being shown, quality of English language presentation and appearance of the paper. Grade weights are 10% of the semester grade for each exam.

At the class meeting when the exam papers are due, all students discuss their exam papers in class in small group sessions. These discussions are evaluated by students at the end of the term as part of the "Class Contribution" grade component, which is 15%.

EVALUATIONS

In the Fall 1996 semester, two sections had in-class traditional exams. Subsequently, five sections had the Authentic Learning (AL) exams described above. The AL exams were rated by students as being more valuable and the difference in ratings is significant, as explained below.

At the very end of each semester, I distribute a two part questionnaire. The first part is the peer evaluation of "Class Contribution." The second part asks students to evaluate each component of the course on a five point scale, with 1 = "Not at all valuable," and 5 = "Extremely Valuable."

The results for five sections (1996 to 1999), with respect to the exams:

<u>Category</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>n</u>
The Authentic Learning exams	4.22	132
The In-class traditional exams	3.76	37
Difference	0.46	
Standard error of the difference	0.16	
t value	2.89	

Probability that difference is due to sampling error is less than 1.0%

It was not possible to determine to what extent the improvement was due to the take-home vs. in-class exam and to what extent it was due to Authentic Learning vs. traditional format.

Aside from the statistical measures, there were other encouraging outcomes. The quality of about half the papers was truly impressive. Students were taking the assignment seriously and were developing first drafts of comprehensive marketing strategies for their businesses. Such outcomes were of course impossible in the traditional exams.

Another favorable outcome is the fact that I am not receiving any complaints now about having to study all that "Marketing stuff," suggesting that the students now see value in the "Marketing stuff." This I find truly gratifying.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a new type of Mid-term and Final exam for the Graduate Core Marketing courses. The change was motivated by a desire on my part to increase the usefulness of the exam experience and to improve students' perception of the relevance of studying the textbook and writing exams based on the textbook.

With respect to improving students' perceptions, the observed change was positive and statistically significant. With respect to my objective of increasing the usefulness of the exam experience, the results were generally favorable. The majority of the papers submitted showed that the students took the assignment quite seriously. They made reasonable estimates about their likely positions seven to ten years out showed good understanding of textbook concepts and their application to their projected situations. Some of the best papers, prepared by students with entrepreneurial aspirations showed a good start toward preparing their first marketing plan for their new businesses.

A beneficial byproduct of giving authentic learning (AL) exams is that reading AL papers is more interesting than reading papers in which all students answer the same questions.

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