

CAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS LEARN MARKETING MANAGEMENT BY RESEARCHING, WRITING, AND PRESENTING LIVE (MARKETING) CASES?

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiment designed to assess the degree to which the preparation of an original, live-business based marketing case aids student learning in the traditional undergraduate marketing management course. While the experiment suggests that this pedagogy tool does not improve learning, the less than desired impact may be attributed to the experimental design as well as how the pedagogical tool was executed by the instructor. Suggestions and ideas for implementation by other marketing educators are derived from the experiment as it was felt that the pedagogical approach still warrants consideration.

INTRODUCTION

The objectives and nature of the study described in this paper were derived from three basic pedagogical tools that appear very well supported and documented by contemporary marketing education. The three are: (1) the case method instruction and student learning, (2) active and/or experiential learning, and (3) live-case based learning. While discussed relative to the use of financial case learning, the following five key benefits of case based learning offered by Bruner (1999) appear applicable to marketing education: (1) it is effective, (2) it builds capacity for critical thinking, (3) it exercises an administrative point of view, (4) it fosters inductive learning, and (5) it provides a fun learning environment. Due to the realistic nature of case material, discussions and written analyses of cases can deliver on a wide range of learning goals such as the development of application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and organizational skills (Karns 1993). Case studies help students discover and develop their own framework for confronting, understanding, and managing realistic organizational problems (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen 1994; Conant 1996; Valentin 1996). But, there are problems with traditional case learning. Traditional case study based pedagogies rely upon cases already written and published by others. Students are more likely to become fully engaged in case material and encouraged to examine organizational problems more carefully if they are put in a dynamic

environment (Henson, Kennett, and Kennedy 2003). Cases that are "fresh" (decision settings happening within the last year) are known to generate relatively more student interest than those not possessing such characteristics.

THE VALUE OF ACTIVE LEARNING VIA CASE RESEARCH AND WRITING

Nearly 30 years ago Minzberg (1976) called for a very different kind of teaching than business educators were providing. "Greater use should be made of the powerful new skill-development techniques which are experiential and creative in nature.... Educators need to put students into situations where they can practice managerial skill not only interpersonal but also informational and decisional." (p. 53). Peter November (1993) suggested that students need to develop a "holistic view, a sense of problem 'interconnectedness,' an ability to solve problems in complex, unstructured situations, and to learn communications and negotiation skills" (p. 3). Other than the general active and case learning advantages already acknowledged by our literature, it was felt that a student based live case development course could also enhance student-writing skills. This would be an important accomplishment given that practitioners frequently mention communication skill weakness among our students. It was also hoped that the students would be better able to understand key learning concepts in the class. For example, if the decision setting was about market segmentation they might also: (1) have to know something in depth about this topic before doing their field research (i.e., interviewing their small business), (2) have to think carefully about how to write a segmentation decision setting, and (3) have to build a teaching note based around specific learning objectives. Finally, exposure to their classmate's cases (and critiquing them) will also bolster their competency in marketing decision areas outside of their own case topic.

THE STUDY

The treatment group/section of a marketing management course was expected to research, write,

and present an original, live business based marketing case while another section served as a control group. The same instructor in the same semester taught both sections. An attempt was made to make the two sections (which met back to back for the same amount of time two days per week for the 15 week fall semester) "identical" as possible with the exception of the case research, writing, and presentation component of the course. However, this was very difficult given the fact that considerable class time is spent on classroom discussion of cases. The case approach used in this course relied on the fairly common seven step analysis format: (1) situation analysis, (2) decision problem"- statement, (3) decision criteria, (4) alternative generation, (5) alternative evaluation, (6) recommendation, and (7) implementation issues.

Preparing for the Course: Selection of Live Cases and Student Training

Small business clients (n = 5) were chosen for the study using the assistance of a Small Business Development Center. Clients were aware of their role in the experiment and informed that the main purpose was to benefit the students. The preparation or training of students on how to research and write a marketing case was accomplished through three different means. They were given class presentation of related topics, provided with handouts on key topics, and interacted with the instructor outside of the classroom. Three (75 minute) class periods were used to explain, describe, and demonstrate the process of researching and writing a case. Students in the treatment section were also given a number of handouts during this training period.

STUDY FINDINGS/OUTCOMES

Students in the treatment group earned an overall mean score of 72.9% on the final exam (case analysis) while those in the control group earned a mean of 75.9%. Thus, students with the live case research and writing experience did not perform better on the final exam than those students without the experience. The mean number of total course points earned by the treatment group was 841.9 (out of 1000 possible) whereas the mean for the control group was 817.6. The two scores were not significantly different. While the overall class attendance and classroom participation mean scores were higher for the treatment than the control group (76.9% versus 73.8%), they were not statistically different (90% level). Thus, it is concluded that the two different approaches to learning marketing

management did not vary in terms of their ability to help students achieve the course objectives.

Other measures of impact were also used to look for and assess any efficacy differences. Formal student evaluations were reviewed and it was found that scores on specific questions were not statistically different between the two groups. Open-ended comments were too few to draw conclusions. Post-class, informal discussion with six of the treatment group students generated the following positive comments: they liked getting outside of the textbook and working with a real world setting, the project helped their self-confidence, there was dislike for so much end of the semester work or crunch, and some did not like the fact that their case research group membership was not the same as their (earlier in the semester) traditional case analysis group. Some members in two of the five groups expressed dissatisfaction with one or more teammates. These two groups felt that these individuals negatively impacted their case research project's quality.

Overall, the instructor was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the undergraduate work on the cases. The treatment group students did exhibit a sense of commitment to their project and such is attributed to the fact that they were working with a real business. However, this setting is fraught with the same potential problems that have been acknowledged by those working with live clients in other courses such as marketing research. Two of the five businesses, despite efforts by the Small Business Development appeared to believe the students were to act as consultants. These businesses were more interested in what they got out of the process than what the students did. This represented poor execution on the part of business selection and management of the relationship as the semester unfolded. Another problem was engaging the businesses nearly two months before students were to actively begin their research process.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

An obvious concern in this study was the degree to which the experiment was internally and externally valid. There were no controls to ensure that students enrolling in the two course sections were "equal" on all other variables that might have influenced their ability to perform well, or not, on the live case research project. In fact, designing the study as an experiment with two groups was perceived as forcing too much emphasis on making things equal for the two groups except for the live case project. Hindsight

suggests that it might have been better to just teach the two sections the same way and thus expose both groups to the new pedagogy. Additionally, there were no controls to prevent students from either section from talking with each other about what each section was doing for the course. And, as noted in ideas for improvement in the prior section, there was no guarantee that the way the treatment was carried out by the instructor was the "ideal" way to train, motivate, and assist undergraduate students on this particular assignment. Lastly, the measures employed to assess efficacy may not have been those that were needed. For example, whether or not the case research and writing project helped improve communications skills (e.g., talking with business people and/or writing) remains unknown at this point in time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, it was felt that the failure of the treatment to produce the desired outcomes is mostly attributed to pedagogy execution versus the pedagogy itself. Other than the obvious need to carefully select live case clients is the call for better execution in a number of other areas. Starting the case research and writing process earlier in the semester is advised. As case authors most likely appreciate, it takes quality time to conceive and develop a quality case. Students in this course needed more time to develop skills and to execute them. The other major change would involve a more logically and mutually satisfying manner for assigning students to specific teams and businesses or at least not moving them from existing teams as was done in this experiment. A formal assessment of the process was not sought from the live businesses because it was felt that they were not in the best position to determine the degree to which the assignment had contributed to course objectives. However, it would be wise in the future to periodically contact and communicate with the business so that expectations about student performance can be managed and relevant feedback on their performance gathered in real time.

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