

CREATING MEANING IN MARKETING EDUCATION: CONTRASTING FACULTY AND STUDENTS' DEFINITION OF MEANING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores marketing professors' definition of meaning in marketing education and whether professors derive meaning in their work. Additionally, by comparing the results of this study to past research with marketing students, a gap analysis is undertaken to determine if professors' and students' definitions of meaning are congruent. Results of qualitative research reveal that marketing is meaningful to faculty because it is relevant to all facets of life and allows faculty to contribute knowledge to students, business and community through research and teaching. Five gaps between students' and faculty definitions of meaning are identified, and recommendations to close these gaps are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Granitz (2001) interviewed students of marketing. A core theme uncovered was personal relevance, which refers to whether students perceive that they are learning concepts that will be used in their business careers. What has not been undertaken to date is an assessment of how marketing professors define meaning, whether they find their work meaningful, and if marketing professors' definition of meaning is congruent with students' definition. Thus, there are three objectives to this research:

- 1) to understand marketing professors' definition of meaning in marketing education;
- 2) to determine whether marketing professors derive meaning in their work;
- 3) to perform a gap analysis contrasting marketing professors' definition of meaning with students' definition of meaning.

Meeting these objectives is critical for several reasons. First, there is a strong positive relationship between work meaning and levels of outcomes, such as quality of work and satisfaction (England 1990). If administrators understand marketing professors' definition of meaning, they can define programs and activities to satisfy the definition and yield relevant outcomes. Second, if there is a gap between marketing students' and marketing professors' definition of meaning, recommendations can be developed to close the gap. In studies focused on

social science students, perceptions of meaningless education were associated with lack of interest in continuing education, higher levels of academic dishonesty, and the belief that formal education is not necessary to be successful (Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing 2000; Lopez 1998; Reimanis 1983). Thus, it must be determined whether this gap exists. Finally, as faculty meaning has never been researched before, this paper will introduce a new and necessary area of research.

MEANING AND MARKETING EDUCATION

Little has been written about meaning in relation to marketing education. Granitz (2001) demonstrated that marketing students define meaning as personally relevant to their business careers. Allowing students to practice pragmatic skills (though active learning) and to interact with businesses and the local community can foster personal relevance. Thus, as a class activity moves beyond the classroom, the activity garners greater meaning. Finally, students consider a portion of their marketing classes meaningful. Courses that they perceive can help them with work are meaningful and courses that do not help them are meaningless.

While past research has not addressed meaning for faculty, several authors have studied related issues. Mezirow (1991) suggested that faculty build knowledge through content, process and premise reflection. By asking the questions, "What actions do I take in teaching?" (content), "How can I foster learning?" (process), and "Why do I teach this way?" (reflection), faculty can examine their teaching methodologies and philosophies, as well as examine the views they hold on the purpose of higher education. Such exercises can aid faculty in identifying what is meaningful to them and in evaluating the synergy and the gap between what they and their students find meaningful.

Theorists have also urged faculty to conduct research or produce creative work for intrinsic reasons, to introduce "wonder and awe" into teaching and scholarship, and to reimagine academic work in terms of community, with the goal of making and sharing knowledge (Bean 1998). The

allusion to intrinsic reasons is evocative of the student definition of meaning as personally relevant.

In discussing meaning and marketing education from a faculty perspective, it would be useful to understand the value faculty assign to the three categories of teaching, research and service. Theorists have suggested that a tension between teaching and research priorities is impacting the academy (Boyer 1990; Koplik and Welsh 1993; Mooney 1992). Boyer contends that the scholarships of teaching, research, integration (making connections across disciplines) and application ("applying knowledge to consequential problems" p. 21) should be equally valued in academia. In a study by Eble and McKeachie (1985), 54% of faculty reported conflicts arising from teaching, scholarship and service responsibilities. Additionally, Tang and Chamberlain (1997) found that university professors feel they are rewarded predominately for research and must concentrate on it to the detriment of teaching and at the expense of their students. Consequently, in deriving meaning, faculty may focus on an area separate from teaching students, creating a gap.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore marketing professors' perceptions of meaning, to understand whether and where they derive meaning in their work, and to determine if there is a gap between faculty and student definitions of meaning.

METHODOLOGY

Given the interpretive nature of this research, depth interviews were conducted. These interviews allowed the researchers to delve deeply into the definition of meaning. The interviews were conducted among 16 faculty members at 2 large western universities and one large southeastern university. One university had an emphasis on teaching, while the other two universities had an emphasis on research and teaching. Half of the respondents were tenured, and half of the respondents were tenure-track.

Posing open-ended questions, interviewers probed for the definition of meaning in relation to marketing education (in general), teaching marketing, conducting research, and performing service. Additionally, faculty members were queried regarding what they thought students found meaningful. Researchers analyzed the findings according to methods described by Erickson (1986). To ensure validity, results were triangulated across researchers (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

RESULTS

The findings discussed below explain professors' views of marketing education and meaning, and the role of teaching, research and service in creating meaning.

Meaning and Marketing Education

In professors' discussions of marketing education and meaning, two themes emerge. In the first theme, marketing education provides meaning because it is useful in the workplace. Professors believe that they are teaching skills that will help students run and grow a business. According to one participant, "Most business success is based on ideas executed in marketing." The second theme professors articulate is that marketing education provides meaning because it helps students understand people. Students can use marketing concepts presented in class to understand a wide range of relationships beyond marketing. Representative of the general opinion, one faculty member stated, "The notion of exchange is inherent in everything we do. It has wide application in dealing with people."

Meaning in the Work of a Marketing Educator

Professors derive varying amounts of meaning from teaching, research, and service. As might be expected, professors in teaching institutions found the teaching component to be most meaningful. Professors from research institutions also found teaching meaningful, but felt that a larger portion of their time was devoted to research. Regardless of the type of institution, faculty found the service component of the profession to provide less meaning than teaching or research.

Meaning and Teaching. Professors derive meaning in teaching by imparting practical information. Meaning is especially high for faculty when students see the relationship between course materials and their application to business and everyday life. One participant reported, "If I can teach a student five things that they will use five years from now, my job is meaningful."

Professors consistently articulate the reward they receive from helping students see the bigger picture. They talk about making a difference in students' lives and introducing students to new ways of seeing the world. One professor stated, "My favorite time is when they 'get it'...we are talking about more than marketing."

The amount of meaning a professor finds in the classroom also is impacted by the teaching style fit. Fit is defined as the synergy between the instructor's teaching style and students' learning styles. For individual professors, certain teaching styles yield

greater personal satisfaction. If the professor's teaching style does not match the students' learning style, the professor must teach in a style less meaningful to himself/herself or teach in his meaningful style to the detriment of students. One professor stated, "For me, the meaningful way to teach is by lecture. However, these students seem to prefer an active learning approach."

Meaning and Research. Professors derive meaning from both the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of research. Intrinsic meaning comes from professors working on ideas they find interesting. One person shared the sentiment that, "There is complete freedom in this job to do what you want and what is meaningful to you." However, several untenured professors believe they are going through the motions of producing research that will be acceptable to the academy as a way to earn tenure. Two comments offered were, "It's just a numbers game that helps our careers," and, "You go through a lot of hoops."

The extrinsic aspects of research that provide meaning are its value to the academic and business communities. One professor stated that, "Research can influence the way scholars and managers think. It can impact long-term and practical outcomes." Research can create knowledge available to colleagues, students, and the community.

Meaning and Service. Two types of service provide meaning. The first type is service that benefits students, such as mentoring, awards ceremonies, and honors programs. The second type is service with outcomes. A faculty member mentioned, "The best committee I was one was one where we redesigned the graduate program. We got to see the actual results of our work." However, many faculty members feel that much of their service is bureaucratic paper pushing with no end result. "Service takes time away from important tasks. It seems menial. We could hire someone to do it."

DISCUSSION

We began this research with the objective of uncovering how marketing professors define meaning, whether they derive meaning from their work, and if their definition of meaning is congruent with students' definition of meaning. The discussion will focus on each of these issues in that order.

Faculty Definition of Meaning

The interviews revealed several definitions of meaning. First, for faculty, the core reasoning for delivering a marketing education is that it is applicable to business and provides a foundation for understanding everyday life as a consumer.

Therefore, marketing is meaningful because it is relevant to all facets of life. Second, meaning is defined through contribution. Professors define meaning in the context of giving something to students through their teaching, research and service, or giving something to the community through their service and research. Third, meaning also is defined through receiving. It can embody receiving positive feedback from students, from business professionals, from academics, or from the university. Finally, meaning is defined as self-gratifying. Professors define meaning as activities that benefit the individual faculty member. For example, research is meaningful to individual professors because it helps their career (regarding tenure) or it benefits faculty by fostering their interests.

Faculty and Meaning

Professors derive meaning from all areas of their work with the greatest meaning coming from teaching and research. In the context of teaching, meaning is predominately received from the student. Faculty members feel as if they have accomplished a meaningful task if students see the big picture, if there is a good fit between their teaching style and the student's learning style, and if they feel that they are teaching students practical skills that students will use in their careers. In the domain of research, meaning focuses upon the educators themselves. Evoking the intrinsic reasons and knowledge sharing themes recommended by Bean (1998), meaningful research is research that is personally interesting, garners acclaim because it is interesting to others and considered a major breakthrough, or helps professors achieve tenure. The only theme that is not self-centered is the "provides value to the community" theme. This theme predominately focuses on sharing knowledge with society to improve the current state of being.

Faculty versus Student Meaning

A key similarity between faculty and student meaning is that both groups derive meaning from relevance. However, we identified five gaps in faculty and student perceptions of meaning. Interestingly, none of these gaps are caused by the tension among research, teaching and service (Boyer 1990; Tang and Chamberlain 1997). In fact, much of faculty relevance is achieved when students find courses relevant. Thus, the desire for faculty to close these gaps is likely high. Below, we will describe each of the five gaps and provide recommendations for closing them.

Gap 1: Differ on the importance of understanding the consumer's view of marketing. Professors and students derive meaning when they learn material

that is relevant. However, there is a gap between what professors believe is relevant and what students believe is relevant. Professors find meaning in marketing based on its relevance in both business and everyday life. However, students focus on marketing's relevance with regard to business. Therefore, faculty may be focusing on everyday consumer issues and stress and exemplify concepts students consider irrelevant.

Recommendation: Professors need to sell students on the value of understanding their decisions as consumers in everyday life. Faculty members should not only provide relevant workplace examples, but also show students how they are exposed to marketing in their day-to-day lives. This can be accomplished by tying current events into the course and by encouraging students to share their experiences as consumers.

Gap 2: Differ on what information is relevant for a marketing career.

Professors' view of relevant information for students' marketing careers is broader than the students' view. Students determine relevance based on their immediate interests and understanding of the business world; whereas, faculty believe they possess a broader, longer-range view of relevance. For example, faculty may believe that teaching students marketing math (i.e., break even analysis, margins, contributions, etc.) as relevant, while students may consider it irrelevant as they do not expect to use the skill in the workplace.

Recommendation: Professors should demonstrate the value of understanding concepts that students do not consider relevant. If they cannot justify a concept's immediate or long-range relevance, professors should not be teaching it. Ways to demonstrate relevance include articulating the connection between the concept and its application in the business world and inviting guest speakers who can validate the importance in the business world of the classroom material.

Gap 3: May possess varied knowledge currency.

Professors may not know what is relevant, nor may students. This gap is most likely to manifest itself in rapidly changing areas of marketing, such as database marketing and Internet marketing.

Recommendation: Professors not only can increase their knowledge in rapidly developing areas of marketing through practitioner conferences, popular press books on marketing, roundtable discussions, business advisory boards, internships, and consulting, but they can take advantage of guest speakers who can educate the students and the professor at the same time. If students are not aware

of the relevance of new knowledge and skills, faculty must justify the material (discussed above).

Gap 4: Customization vs. Generalizability. Students focus on what is "personally" relevant. However, there is a mix of students in each class, and specific concepts may be more personally relevant to different students. For example, a student who is interested in being a buyer may find a marketing math class more relevant, while a student who wants to pursue a career in advertising may find a discussion on the marketing mix more pertinent. Professors sometimes find it difficult to customize information, especially in large classes, and instead present information in a way that generalizes across the broadest range of students.

Recommendation: In small or large classes, at the start of the term, professors should take some class time to meet their students. This can take the form of an introduction exercise where students discuss their background and interests. The faculty member can then tailor his/her lectures and examples to be more relevant to students. While personalizing class for each individual student is beyond the instructor's ability, the professor may be able to personalize material to different segments of students in the class. In another technique, the professor can share a general concept and then ask class members to provide examples of how the concept relates to their interests or experience.

Gap 5: Differing teaching and learning styles. Some faculty members derive greater meaning when their teaching style matches their students' learning style. If they do not match, lower levels of meaning may result.

Recommendation: Across the duration of the course, faculty should teach to incorporate varied styles of learning. While the professor would be expected to rely most heavily on his/her preferred style, even small doses of other styles can enhance understanding. Different students respond to different styles of teaching (Felder 1993, 1996). At the same time that the instructor incorporates different styles of teaching, students should be encouraged to develop different styles of learning.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we found that marketing faculty define meaning in several ways. Meaning can be based on relevance, contribution and self-gratification, as well as receiving. Thus, universities can design programs and activities to respond to this definition. For example, to respond to meaning as contribution, universities can initiate roundtable discussions with

local business practitioners in which faculty present practical knowledge gleaned from their research.

Faculty is more likely to find meaning from teaching or research than from service. Service is only relevant when it benefits students or leads to action. In response, administrators should ensure that faculty is made aware of all actions that result from their service and, where applicable, highlight how the service activity benefits students. Additionally, several gaps were uncovered, many focusing on differences between what students believe is relevant and what faculty believe is relevant. Thus, faculty must evaluate which gaps are present and respond with the recommended actions.

To further validate these results, we recommend additional research. This qualitative research should be followed by a quantitative wave of research. Based on definitions uncovered in this study and Granitz (2001), scales can be constructed to measure meaning for faculty and students. Should the faculty definitions of meaning be substantiated, a comprehensive list of recommendations to instill meaning can be developed. Should the faculty-student gaps be confirmed, research testing the recommendations can be undertaken. Finally, while meaning for students and faculty has been explored, future studies can also examine meaning for business practitioners and university administrators.

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