

WILD CARDS: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TOOL FOR TEACHING FAST REACTING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the proposition that students of marketing need to learn how to react as well as how to plan. Conventional marketing courses apply a forecast and plan approach to the problem of handling uncertainty. This leaves a skill-gap in students who have jobs where it is difficult or impossible to forecast and plan. The paper describes the design of a capstone course in marketing in which unforecastable conditions are created. A reacting skills learning tool called a 'wild card' is explained in detail, including examples of the learning achieved.

INTRODUCTION

You might think that the age old question of free will versus fate is more appropriate for philosophy than marketing. Although few marketing professors explicitly address this issue, all of us deal with it indirectly when we teach our students how to handle uncertainty. How do we do this? Here are three options:

- Goal directed - you decide what you want to happen and then make it happen. This is appropriate where you have a high degree of control over the future. It is raw free will.
- Forecast and plan - you choose a goal after studying the probable options. External factors determine your options. Your efforts to reach your goal and how well you can forecast outside events, over which you have little or no control, determine your success. This is the conventional middle of the road approach that we teach.
- Reacting - you have virtually no control over events and you have to make do with the situation. This is pure fate.

Let me illustrate these approaches with the WMEA '94 conference. I want to attend the conference. I know when and where it will be held and I have a rough idea of what it will cost to attend. I will be free of teaching responsibilities when the conference is on. Success is largely in my hands. If I can find a source of funds and comply with the booking processes then there is a very good chance that I will attend the conference. I will have exercised considerable control over a future event. This is a goal directed approach.

In the second case I want to attend the conference but I also want to present a paper. I have never attended a WMEA conference before. I am unclear

about the standard of papers presented at the conference and I know that there is a review process. Under these circumstances I will need to estimate the standard that I must reach with my paper, plan and execute the paper, and get it in by the deadline. However its acceptance will be in the hands of the reviewers. I have much less control in this second case but I can forecast and plan.

In the final case, my paper is accepted, I sort out my travel, and I arrive at the conference. I have next to no control over when, during the conference, I will present my paper, no control over the room, the speaking time allocated to me, the audience that comes, or the paper before. Also I do not know what may happen when I give the paper. The overhead projector bulb may blow. The lights may fail. I might get something in my eye, and so on. All sorts of things could happen and it will be up to me to deal with them *at the time*. This is reacting.

It is my contention that marketing courses at University are built round the second strategy for dealing with the future. We teach a forecast and plan approach in which we advocate that students analyse a situation, forecast what is likely to happen, set goals, plan, and then implement the plan. This process is relatively easy to teach since there are specific techniques associated with each stage. In addition it seems rational and logical. But is there any evidence that it leads to success?

PLANNING = SUCCESS?

There is evidence, albeit limited, that planning is not correlated with business success. Here is an extract from a study of German multinational companies (Welge and Kenter 1988):

"...it has to be concluded from these findings that it is totally unimportant how intensively German MNCs make use of planning as an instrument to control their foreign manufacturing subsidiaries.

These findings are perfectly in line with other empirical studies. Corporate planning, as mentioned above, is often believed to have a positive impact on company performance, especially if the planning process is conceived on a long-term or strategic basis. A great number of empirical studies, however, has proved this relationship as being by far less clear and distinct than conjectured."

A survey of marketing practice in New Zealand (van der Walt *et al.* 1989) indicated that while most respondents did some kind of marketing planning (95%), only a few developed formal marketing plans (37%). In addition the researchers could not find any relationship between marketing planning and profitability. Thirty eight percent of the companies that developed formal or long-term market plans had average or high comparative gross profit whereas 47% of those that did no planning or only used informal planning had a relatively high gross profit.

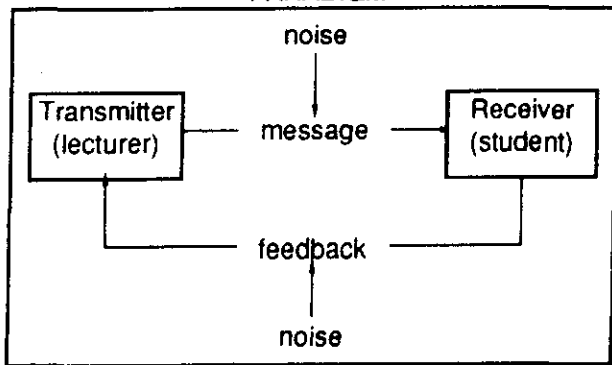
The forecast and plan approach requires a forecastable future. If the future is very difficult to forecast then the method is of no use or only limited use. As marketing educators, the question we must ask is the extent to which our students will be in business situations where they can forecast with reasonable accuracy. When they find it difficult or impossible to forecast they will need reacting skills. This paper is an account of how I build reacting skills in my marketing students.

TEACHING - LEARNING PARADIGM

I am responsible for the cap-stone course in marketing for undergraduates at my University. When I designed the course in 1987 I built a special LSS. As (Alport 1993) has explained, an LSS is a large-scale simulation. These simulations are much more complex and extensive in their coverage of business than the current rash of business games being used in Business Schools, see for example (Faria 1987). They are comprehensive and form the core of a course rather than being a peripheral component.

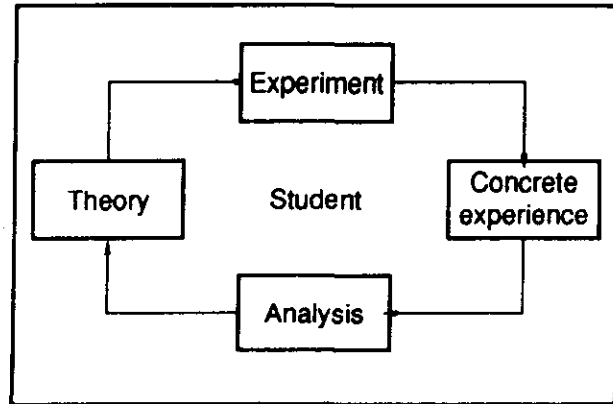
The familiar pedagogical knowledge-transmission paradigm is given in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: THE KNOWLEDGE-TRANSMISSION PARADIGM



Contrast this with the experiential paradigm of learning, based on (Kolb 1984) given in figure 2. The experiential model conforms with the andragogical approach to education, see for example (Galbraith 1984) (Knowles 1984) (Perry 1985) (Watkins 1992).

FIGURE 2: THE EXPERIENTIAL PARADIGM



I built an LSS because I wanted to create an andragogical experiential learning environment (figure 2) as a replacement for the conventional pedagogical transmission teaching environment (figure 1).

For many of my students the cap-stone marketing course is the last course that they will study before leaving University to join the work force. I intentionally devised a course that would help them to bridge the gulf between learning at University and learning in a full time job.

With my LSS students spend almost the whole time in work groups called 'companies' of about eleven to twelve students operating as a business and making business decisions in competition with other companies. 'Tutorials' are business meetings organised and run by each company.

CREATING UNCERTAINTY

The business setting, combined with the need to organise and run operating sub-groups, coordinate these sub-groups, and take decisions without much in the way of help gives a rich, chaotic and complex problem-based learning environment. As a natural consequence of this, individuals and groups have to cope with uncertainty and the unforecastable. They get plenty of opportunities to develop reacting skills. Since a full set of decisions is made at weekly intervals, there is usually time to discuss expected and unexpected problems, to canvas views, and do some sort of analysis.

I was unsatisfied. Though I was providing a degree of uncertainty, I was not giving my students experience with problems that need instant attention, emergencies where they must drop everything, act at once, and think on their feet - 'fast reacting'.

CREATING FAST REACTING PROBLEMS

How can you use an LSS to create situations requiring

high speed group reacting skill? The way that I do it involves the simulation only indirectly.

As part of the program to develop the communication skills of my students I, like many other educators, get them to give group presentations. The LSS that I run works on decisions for each quarter of a year. One student week is equivalent to one business quarter. The first week of the course is an introduction so after five weeks the students have completed their first year of business. I ask each company to prepare a short presentation (three minutes maximum and to be presented a week later) outlining how it has handled the problem of organising itself into a coherent, competent decision-making machine. This is always greeted with derisive laughs because even at that stage none of the companies can claim to be coherent, competent decision-making machines. At the same time I explain the idea of fast reacting skills.

My students have no difficulty in seeing the importance of fast reacting. Nothing in their previous formal education has taught them these skills. I explain that I will be running a fast reacting skill exercise in which they will all experience a group emergency. *Their learning objective is to extract every ounce of learning from the experience.* Here I am creating an opportunity for students to participate in deep learning of the kind identified by Marton and Saljo (1976).

The presentations, to be made in front of the whole class of about 100 students, will have one small but highly significant difference to the normal presentations that students make. Each company will receive a wild card.

After a company has been chosen to make its presentation, it leaves the lecture room. The company coordinator draws a card from a set of wild cards that contain unknown conditions and he or she then joins the company outside. The company then has one minute before it makes an entrance and then its presentation "How we organised ourselves into a coherent, competent decision-making machine". This presentation must be under the conditions stipulated on the wild card.

The teaching principle that I use is to explain why and then explain how: *why* I am going to set up and run a wild card presentation situation and *how* it will work. I then give time for questions and a week for students to prepare.

WILD CARDS

Of course you are wondering, as they were, what is on a typical wild card. Stop for a moment and think what you might have put on the wild cards. It has to be

something within the capability of the student group, but provide something that is unexpected and a significant hurdle to the kind of students who take cap-stone marketing courses.

Initially, I just created wild cards out of the blue but now I have devised four types of wild card:

- Role playing. This is my most common type. Examples include 'You are all Japanese', 'Shakespearian', 'You are a medical team', 'Men are women and women are men'.
- Communication constraint. This includes such things as silent presentations, a ballet, sing it, all backs to the audience, it's a telephone conversation.
- Physical object. For example, no overhead projector, blind-folding all actors, a member of the team is dead and this is the funeral.
- Random word. This is useful if you find it difficult to think of ideas under the other three headings. Just open a dictionary at random and pick the first word. Then try to adapt it into a wild card. For example, I did this and got the word 'operate'. This gave me the idea for the medical team wild card.

Many people regard my wild cards as outrageous. So did the students and yet they not only went along with it, they had fun, made many mistakes, and through their own observations and experience learned an incredible amount about group reacting skills.

ASSESSMENT

In assessing this part of the course, I do not mark performances or skill in handling the wild cards. Like Fisher (1990), I use a journal method of assessment. I allocate marks for the extent to which students extract, in their reflective writing in their journals, valuable insights from the experiences that I stage manage for them. As I said above, 'their learning objective is to extract every ounce of learning from the experience'. This removes some of the risk since marks are not related to performance in a tricky experiential exercise. In addition it enables students to extract learning from their own as well as other company 'performances'.

This is different to assessment under transmission learning. In experiential learning, and particularly with the wild card exercise, the act of doing the exercise is an integral part of the learning process. The reflections that a student produces are important, but living through a fast reacting group exercise in front of the whole class and the video camera leads to a psychological robustness that cannot be learned from any book. These students have gone through fire and survived.

In addition, the act of drawing the learning out of the

experience is a part of the process. It is easy to focus on *what* is learned and so easy to miss *how* it is learned. The act of drawing the learning out leads to reflective skill development.

As to the insights extracted by students, I have included several from my students' journals as illustrations of the kinds of reflections that they produced. These insights are of value to all those who have to make group presentations under uncertain conditions:

- **KISS.** Keep the message as simple as possible.
- **KNOW.** When there is a problem (wild card), good communication of it to group members is essential. Every one in the group needs to know. It is very easy in the trauma of the situation to misread, mishear, misunderstand.
- **RIDE.** Once you know what the problem is, you must stop thinking of it as a problem. Regard it is an opportunity on which your message can ride. The audience appreciates it when you use the wild card as part of your message.
- **PRACTICE.** One of the best ways of preparing for wild cards is to try out your own wild cards. These can be generated by each member of the group in private, put in a pile, and then used when practising the presentation.
- **FRIENDS.** It is virtually impossible to react as a group to a wild card when group members do not know each other well. Time put into getting to know each other before the exercise pays off.
- **KILL.** Nobody is indispensable so never overlook this rule when preparing a group presentation. Practise with different people doing different things.
- **ALTERNATIVES.** Always anticipate major problems such as overhead projectors not working. Create alternative versions of the presentations before the event.

CONCLUSION

You do not need to have an LSS to use wild cards. I use my LSS to create a general scenario of uncertainty and for many other purposes (November 1993). It is not an essential part of the wild card tool. Anyone who requires their students to make presentations could use wild cards. However if you do try wild cards please do not mark performance - mark learning.

The way I use wild cards may strike you as harsh. I certainly throw students into the deep end without first explaining how to swim. But it is a harsh world out there. Are we really helping our students by protecting them from reality? Is it not better for them to face real difficulties in the classroom - fail but learn from that failure - rather than fail in the real world? Many of

my students point out that the wild card situations that I put them into are unlikely to occur in the real world. I explain that I do not believe that my job is to replicate the real world. My job is to create a worse scenario than the real world. If students can cope with and learn from that then the real world will seem easy.

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