

STUDENT-DRIVEN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXAMS

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ABSTRACT

This study describes an experiential learning exam designed by students in a Consumer Behavior course. The paper presents a methodology to develop experiential exams and student feedback on the process and the experiential exam itself. Overall, students thought the experiential exam they created was a beneficial learning experience. Some recommendations are offered regarding altering the process.

INTRODUCTION

The marketing education literature is filled with numerous studies supporting the trend toward active, experiential learning. The Karns (2005) study of marketing student perceptions of learning activities shows strong support for a variety of experiential learning activities, such as internships, field trips and student-operated businesses. Typically most all experiential learning activities are *project-related*. For example, Drea, Tripp and Stuenkel (2005) developed an in-class game called *Who Wants to be an "A" Student?* and Jackowski and Daughtrey (2005) suggested the creation of a student-operated business in order to enhance student problem-solving skills. There has been very little discussion of *experiential exams* used by marketing educators. Frontczak (2005) discussed an alternative exam called the Six Flags exam, where students were provided with a creative, experiential exam experience, instead of a traditional exam. Results in that study showed the experiential exam was successful in terms of development of problem-solving skills, openness to new ideas, and facilitation of learning.

This study is an extension of the experiential assessment exam where instead of the professor creating the experiential exam assignment, the students in class designed the exam. According to critical thinking theory in the marketing education literature, *student-driven* activities and assignments where the educator is less of an authority figure are often quite successful (Frontczak and Daughtrey 2004). The focus of this research is not whether to use an experiential exam, but whether or not to have students design the exam.

Assurance of learning is an important aspect of marketing education today. Several studies have looked at the significance and challenges of assessment today (Bacon 2003; Eastman and Allen 1999; Hartley, Cross and Rudellus 2000; Linrud and Hall 1999; Misra and Morgan 2003), however, there are no set standards for assessment in marketing education. As educators seek new approaches to effective and meaningful assessment they hope to favorably impact student learning.

This paper will: (1) discuss alternative forms of assessment, (2) present a process for developing student-driven experiential learning exams, (3) analyze results of the effectiveness of this experiential exam, and (4) offer recommendations to those considering use of such an exam.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment is not only a means of evaluating student learning, but it is often used as a method to revise and improve an entire marketing program (Dudley and Marlow 2005). Hartley, Cross and Rudellus (2000) provide an excellent overview of the multitude of rationales for assessment today. One of the primary motivations in terms of assessment revolves around legislative and university mandates to assess educational programs. The trend in business and education toward continuous improvement has also meant that changes must be measured. Dudley and Marlow (2005) discuss the two consistent threads running through all definitions of assessment: (1) assessment focuses on desired learning outcomes and (2) data from assessment is used to improve the student learning process. A seemingly endless variety of assessment techniques exist. More traditional exams, such as essay exams and multiple choice exams, typically assess content/knowledge acquisition, while performance measures such as presentations, written projects, case studies or simulations assess skills development. The primary categories of assessment tools considered by Dudley and Marlow (2005) were tests, portfolios, surveys of students and alumni, and performance in a capstone course in marketing. Their comprehensive assessment program provides valuable processes for marketing departments to consider using for assessment purposes. This study recommends an alternative

assessment measure for marketing educators to use.

PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING STUDENT-DRIVEN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXAMS

Frontczak (2005) developed a creative, experiential alternative method of assessment called the *Six Flags* exam. After visiting a Six Flags amusement park and observing the behavior of park visitors, each student wrote an exam relating their observations at the park to consumer behavior concepts and theories. For this study, instead of a professor-driven experiential exam, a student-driven experiential learning exam is proposed. The process for creating a student-driven experiential exam was as follows:

1. All students in one section of Consumer Behavior were given an assignment (see Figure 1). Students were informed they would be doing an "alternative exam" for their second exam in the course.
2. On the designated date, all students brought enough copies of the experiential exam which they had created for every other student in class. We passed out a copy of each exam to all classmates so each person received 28 different exams.
3. No names were on the assignments so that each student could remain anonymous and exams would not be judged based on the author.
4. Students read all exam ideas.
5. A general discussion followed on what should be some of the broad constraints needed for a successful experiential exam. (Again, the goal was to have a student-driven process and exam.) For example, the students decided:
 - A. The experience should occur on a class day and at class time.
 - B. Students could not do the experiential exam alone without any other students from class. They determined a process to exactly select one of the 28 exams.
6. The class decided that each student would pick their top three exam concepts. They also said you could select your own idea.
7. The professor put all 28 concepts on the board. Students came up to the board row by row and marked their three choices. (One student put two "checks" on one option and another student quickly said something).
8. The top choices became clear with five exam concepts receiving the most votes.

9. More discussion on the top choices followed.
10. Students decided that there would be another vote where each student could vote for one of the top five exam options.
11. There were two clear winners in the final vote.
12. Since one of the comments on the original exam assignment stated "class will select one exam (or two options, if two are voted on equally)," the class decided that the top two exam alternatives would be selected. Therefore, students could choose from one of two experiential exam options.

Overall, this process for selecting a student-driven experiential exam went fairly well. More specific findings on how students evaluated this process will follow in the next section of the study. The final two options included going to either a nearby farmer's market or the main downtown shopping mall. The exact assignment written by students was followed, even though the instructor might have altered it somewhat. In addition, the farmer's market exam was written by two classmates together, which was allowed according to the original assignment statement, "you may work with one other person to create the exam." One last part of the process once the two options were voted on is that a "straw vote" was taken on which option they would likely select. The number was fairly equal for the farmer's market and the outdoor shopping mall. Students said there would be no need to have two options if very few were to pick one. Again, the experience itself was to be "interactive" according to the instructions.

Following the selection process, the instructor reminded the class about the general topic areas to be considered for the experiential exam: opinion leadership, personal influence, perception, learning, involvement and personality. At the end of that class period, students signed up for one of two options.

RESULTS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STUDENT-DRIVEN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXAM

Following the farmer's market or mall experience and completion of an individually written exam, several measures of the effectiveness of the assignment were implemented. The first part of the student's evaluation of the entire exam experience was based on a form developed by Sandler and Kamins (1987). Students were asked to respond to 17 statements on a nine-point rating scale, where 1 equals strongly disagree and 9 equals strongly agree. Items related to student learning,

involvement, enjoyability, and satisfaction with the exam. For the second part of the evaluation process, students were asked eleven questions related to the process for selecting the exam concepts and their recommendation on using this sort of experiential exam in future classes. The final sample size was 29. Again, 28 exam alternatives were submitted with one exam being written by two co-authors.

Overall, student evaluations for both the farmer's market and the mall experience were extremely favorable. Mean values for all 17 statements for each group along with the overall mean are presented in Table 1. Interestingly, students who went to the farmer's market rated 14 of the 17 statements slightly higher than the mall group did. Although the difference is small, there may be an explanation for the overall more favorable ratings by those in the farmer's market group. The farmer's market is a smaller more contained area than the downtown mall which extends for about seven large city blocks; therefore, students may have had more opportunity to interact with others in class at the farmer's market. The second alternative reason for the more favorable ratings is that the classroom professor went to the farmer's market and was able to interact with the students there. Since both experiences took place on the same morning during class time, the professor was only able to attend one.

For the second part of the student evaluation form students responded to 11 questions revolving around the exam experience and the process used to select the exam. Results are presented in Table 2. In general, students experienced the farmer's market or the mall with 2-3 other students. Students preferred a student-designed exam rather than a professor designed exam. Students seemed to enjoy experiencing the exam with other classmates. Again, students turned in an individually written exam following their experience at the farmer's market or the mall. Overwhelmingly, students preferred this experiential exam to a traditional exam. They were generally not disappointed their exam was not selected for the class. Most students thought that two options was a good number, although some would have preferred more. 100% of the class thought that this type of exam should be used every semester.

In addition to these eight straightforward questions asked about the experiential exam process, there were three open-ended questions included. A summary of responses for the three questions follows:

(1) "Comment on/evaluate the process we used in class to decide on the exam to use":

Overall, student's comments about the process were favorable. They liked the fact that we allowed everyone to contribute their opinion on the process and exam concepts. They also liked the voting aspect of the process, although some would have preferred confidential voting. Most thought it was democratic and fair. The main problem mentioned is that the process took too much time. Many would have preferred a more efficient, organized and simpler process.

(2) "How would you change that process":

Most students enjoyed the process and would not change anything. An option proposed by several students is that the professor would select the top 4 or 5 ideas, then the students could vote on their top choice. Along with this suggestion, the professor could eliminate geographically unrealistic options and ideas that did not fit the time constraints. The educator could also eliminate any duplicates. A few recommended voting by raising hands or ballots instead of going to the board to vote. The other suggestion was that students should electronically submit exam ideas in advance, so all ideas could have been carefully read beforehand. Overall, students liked the fact that they were allowed to provide input into the process and the exams selected.

(3) "Any further comments on Exam 2":

Most students had no further comments. Many said that this creative exam was a lot of fun and a great experience. They liked doing something more active and interesting than most traditional exams. Also, many said this was a great way to be able to apply concepts learned in class. They thought they probably learned more by discovering and observing real life examples of the classroom theories. One student mentioned that they were not a "shopper" and would have enjoyed an experience such as the zoo or a sporting event more than the options selected. Interestingly, of the final five options, three were non-shopping experiences (zoo, movie, brewery tour). The top two selected, farmer's market and mall, happened to be more "shopping" venues, even though students were not required to buy anything.

Although the students overwhelmingly rated this student-driven experiential exam as more interesting, highly involving, enjoyable, and worth the effort, a few disadvantages to this exam may

exist. This process for developing a student-driven experiential exam may be somewhat frustrating for students with a low tolerance for ambiguity. Many students are most comfortable with and used to a professor-directed class. Also, the experiential exam requires students to stretch their critical thinking and creativity skills in an uncontrolled environment, in this case the farmer's market or the mall. From the classroom educator's perspective, this experiential exam is somewhat more time consuming both in the experiential activity and the grading. Also, due to the nature of the assignment, there may be greater subjectivity in the grading.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS CONSIDERING USING A STUDENT-DRIVEN EXPERIENTIAL EXAM

Educators considering use of a student-driven experiential exam might use the general process proposed in this study and then expand and alter it according to their course and personal ideas. An experiential exam would be appropriate for a variety of marketing courses, such as Services Marketing, Sports Marketing and Retailing. Given some of the student feedback during this process the following changes would be recommended: (1) have students submit their exam concepts in advance of the class discussion so all students would have the opportunity to carefully read each idea, (2) during the class discussion where all ideas are reviewed, maintain an orderly discussion where only one student is talking at once, (3) for the first vote, rather than having students walk to the board to place their vote, either have a show of hands or a written ballot, (4) again, instead of item 3, the professor could narrow down the concepts *if* the class decided on this, (5) stick to either one exam for everyone or two alternative choices, otherwise, the class would be too dispersed (unless there is a fairly large class); the benefit of one option is that the professor can then interact with all students during the experience, (6) keep in mind that the whole experiential exam process is a learning experience for both students and educator, so learn from what works and what did not, and finally, (7) have fun with the experience and enjoy reading the creative exams. In general, the process should be agreed upon by the class since both the process and the exam are student-driven. For faculty unwilling to give up some of their "authority and control" this type of exam may not be preferable. But for those willing to consider something new, this will likely be an effective and fun additional method of assessment to use for marketing courses.

Table 1
 Overall Evaluation of Experiential Exam
 (9-point agreement scale: 1=Strongly disagree and
 9=Strongly agree)

	Farmer Market n=16	Mall n=13	Overall n=29
1. This Experiential exam was helpful to me in understanding Consumer Behavior	7.06	6.77	6.93
2. This exam make the course more interesting	8.75	7.15	8.03
3. This exam allowed me to apply what I learned to real life situations	7.88	8.00	7.93
4. I was satisfied with my work on this exam	8.00	7.85	7.93
5. I learned a lot about Consumer Behavior from this exam	6.94	6.85	6.90
6. I was highly involved with this exam	7.75	7.46	7.62
7. This exam was enjoyable	8.13	7.54	7.86
8. This exam promoted better student/professor relationships	8.69	6.38	7.66
9. I believe this exam is valuable as a measure of my learning	7.69	7.08	7.41
10. This exam was not boring.	8.25	7.62	7.97
11. I enjoyed working on this exam more than most	8.63	7.15	7.97
12. I would recommend this type of exam to other marketing students	8.63	7.38	8.07
13. This exam was worth the effort	7.88	7.54	7.72

14. This exam suggests the professor cares about me learning Consumer Behavior	8.25	8.15	8.21
15. This exam provided me with a more interesting learning situation than a standard exam	8.31	8.31	8.31
16. This exam required more work than a standard exam would have	4.50	5.92	5.14
17. Overall, this experiential exam was a better learning experience than a standard exam	7.81	7.23	7.55

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