DEVELOPING THE SKILLS OF FUTURE MARKETERS IN CLIENT-BASED MARKETING PROJECTS

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Introduction

Marketing education has a responsibility to prepare students with relevant knowledge and skills for future career success (Dacko 2006). However, there are concerns about whether marketing education produces students with the kinds of knowledge and skills that employers want (Middleton & Long 1990, Aistrich et al. 2006, Gray et al. 2007). It is often claimed that teaching at universities is too theoretical (Davis et al. 2002) and that there is a need to teach the important "how to" skills that are essential for life-long success (Cunningham 1999).

This paper proposes a holistic teaching concept to enhance skills development in client-based marketing development projects. I first introduce briefly the research on marketing skills required from future marketers. I then identify problem solving, creativity and innovativeness, teamwork and communication, and self-reflection as the core skills that need to be developed, and discuss the use of experiential pedagogies in the development of these skills in client-based projects. I present a client-based case course that has been developed to enhance skills development in the context of a master's-level course in marketing at a university. I then propose a teaching concept that sheds light on the challenges, constraints and boundaries in different phases of client-based marketing development projects. I conclude by emphasizing the teacher's role in balancing between several aspects when running the projects.

Essential Capabilities of Future Marketers

Marketing is a complex field requiring practitioners with a broad range of skills and professional knowledge (Finch et al. 2012). The growing complexity and intellectual demands of business as well as the growing importance of technology and globalization require marketing educators to balance between knowledge and skills (Davis et al. 2002). Research on the marketing skills that marketing graduates are expected to have has received much attention in recent years (e.g. Schlee and Harich 2010) and researchers agree on the need to develop skills in practical problem solving (e.g. Floyd & Gordon 1998, Dacko 2006, Finch 2010, Wellman 2010), teamwork (e.g. Cunningham 1999), creativity (e.g. Cunningham 1999, Titus 2000, 2007, Dacko 2006), and communication (e.g. Lundström & White 1997, Floyd & Gordon 1998, Cunningham 1999, Duke 2002, Taylor 2003, Wellman 2010).

The Use of Experiential Pedagogy in Skills Development

Ardley and Taylor (2010) argue for the use of experiential-based learning methods for marketing education. They suggest that marketing curriculums should make greater use of these methods in order to transmit not only marketing knowledge, but also skills that help the students to become marketing practitioners. However, marketing educators need to engage students not only in hands-on experiences and doing, but also in minds-on reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, leading to critical reflection (Young 2002).

Client-based projects form a natural real-life context for marketing students, bringing realism to the classroom and enhancing active, experiential learning (Gremler et al. 2000, Razzouk et al. 2003). This makes the course concepts come to life, enhancing students' ownership of the learning process (Lopez & Lee 2005). Client-based projects foster problem solving, critical thinking, communication and teamwork skills (Barr & McNeilly 2002, Kennedy et al. 2001).

Enabling Skills Development in Client-based Projects

The context of this study is a master's level course in marketing at a business university. The students attending the course are in their fourth year. The learning focuses on creative problem solving in client-based marketing projects. The teaching in this course is based on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The skills development is based on three principles following constructive alignment, awareness of the skills to be developed (learning objectives), skill development in a learner-centered process (teaching and learning activities) and self-reflection on skills development (assessment and learning diaries) (Bedrow & Evers, 2011, Biggs 1996).

We have run the course seven times, three times with marketing students and four times with cross-functional teams, first with designers and then with communication and language students. Twice, it has involved international collaboration.

Students are divided into *teams* to work on client-based *problem-solving* challenges, such as brand building, product development, or service innovation. They work intensively for four months on problem solving. All the teams meet once a week to discuss the projects. During the meetings, the instructors organize workshops on different topics, such as innovative ways to gather customer information or how to analyze qualitative customer data. The student groups present their progress and the challenges facing their process, and then discuss these issues with the class.

The course emphasizes *creativity and innovativeness*. In earlier courses, creativity merely involved implicit expectations, whereas later courses have emphasized creativity by teaching creative methods or bringing in designers to challenge the marketing students' thinking.

Communication skills are enhanced by a workshop and by encouraging each individual to develop their own personal style and build up their confidence by giving weekly presentations.

At the end of each course we have a "final show" resembling the TV reality show "Dancing with the Stars", where judges grade the presentations in a constructive manner. Communication skills also include giving and getting feedback.

Critical reflection and metacognition are enhanced by asking the students to write a learning diary throughout the course. Their diary entries include free, descriptive writing about what has been done, analytical thinking about why they have done those things as well as critical reflection about what and how they have learnt during the course.

A Teaching Concept for Organizing Client-based Skills Development

I propose a teaching method that incorporates the aims, methods and outcomes together with challenges in developing the chosen skills in client-based development projects. The concept is action research-based. This means that the outcome is iterated and grounded in 51 student assignments, individual learning diaries, formal (both anonymous and signed) feedback, informal discussions with students, fellow teachers and clients as well as the teacher/researcher's reflection.

The proposed concept represents the challenges faced in different phases of teaching. It emphasizes choosing and balancing between different aspects as well as the trade-offs that have to be made between different options depending on what the teacher wants to emphasize. Thus, I try to highlight the challenges that teachers face when planning and running these kinds of courses. I wish to highlight the dynamic, not stable, nature of this concept.

The phases in the concept are called *Ready!* – preparation, *Steady!* – setting up the challenge, *Go!* – supporting the learning process and *Finish!* – assessing learning outcomes. The intended levels of knowledge and skills are put into effect in different phases, setting the focus and boundaries for the development projects.

Ready! – In the preparation phase the teacher needs to consider what kinds of teams should be used and what kind of context would produce the intended outcome.

Steady! – When building up the challenge, the teacher needs to balance between the client, the problem area and the chosen team. These have an impact on the level of the challenge given to the student teams and on how complexity, fuzziness, relativity and context dependency should be included in the assignment. The teacher needs to balance between clear, concise, closed assignments versus complex, fuzzy, open challenges.

Go! – Supporting the learning process. Most students need and prefer to have guidance throughout the project from teachers, peer members and client. The teacher must balance two competing guiding processes. The first is a *creative process* that needs to be facilitated. Facilitating means that the teacher enhances the creative environment and cognitive flexibility and provides support to the students when they are working in an area of uncertainty. The process helps the students to think out of the box, to let go, to bear the uncertainty (Titus 2007).

The second process is a *decision-making process* involving business-oriented critical thinking that needs to be coached. This coaching is a problem-solving process that helps the students to reach their goal. This process emphasizes goal orientation, effectiveness, useful solutions, keeping to timetables, and documenting.

Also, the learning environment as a whole should support the learning. To that end, the teacher should establish an environment where the students feel safe and motivated to engage in trial and error – processes that are needed in creative problem solving. In order to foster creativity and break the formal ways of thinking and acting, the teacher may use different learning environments to stimulate new ways of learning.

Finish! – The ultimate outcome of the process is learning outcomes for the individual student. At the master's level, the aim is to build critical thinking and achieve a deeper understanding of the complexity, relativity and context-dependency of knowledge and skills. Also, the students require the knowledge of how to put the skills into context (Gary et al. 2007). Thus, the *conceptual thinking* of the students becomes deeper during the project because they need to apply it. They gain procedural understanding of how to apply the knowledge in the given situation and this leads them to a deeper understanding of the challenges, boundaries and constraints of that knowledge and thus to a better understanding of different forms of marketing knowledge.

The experiential pedagogy also means that the learning outcomes are not limited to knowledge and skills – there is also an emotional outcome, *feelings*. In the best cases, the students have

gratifying feelings of success and accomplishment that improve their self-esteem. In the worst cases, the students experience feelings of frustration and even anger.

Conclusions

Client-based projects are challenging for both teachers and students. Many teachers have faced difficulties in running these projects. I hope to shed light on these challenges and encourage teachers to find their own way of balancing between different aspects of client-based marketing projects. So far, the feedback from the students has been promising. Their inspiration and engagement in projects are exactly what we are looking for in marketing education.

References available upon request