

STUDENT EVALUATION OF AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TECHNIQUE: THE MARKETING PLAN ASSIGNMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a new experiential learning technique called the *Marketing Plan Assignment*, an alternative to the traditional marketing planning assignment. This *Marketing Plan Assignment* allows students to experience all phases of learning according to Kolb's experiential learning model. A sample of undergraduate students completed the assignment. Student evaluations of the new learning technique indicate a very favorable response to this learning experience.

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Transition from a traditional, theoretical, passive, knowledge-transfer approach to an experiential, interactive approach to learning is becoming the norm for marketing educators. Although most educators still use and understand the value of traditional lecture-based learning or "memory-to-memory transfer of information" (Clow and Wachter 1996; Coleman 1995; Roach, Johnston, and Hair 1993), the emphasis on experiential learning activities continues to gain popularity (Butler and Laumer 1992; Gaidis and Andrews 1990a; Gaidis and Andrews 1990b; Graeff 1997; Haas and Wotruba 1990; Kelly 1993; Lollar and Leigh 1995; Olsen 1994; Stretch and Harp 1991; Tanner and Castleberry 1995; Titus and Petroschius 1993; Wedell and Wynd 1994; Wert and Gray 1990; Wright, Bitner and Zeithaml 1994).

In addition to the significant trend toward more experiential education, marketing educators are well aware of the significance of excellent communication skills for their students (Corbin and Glynn 1992; Fisher 1990; Smeltzer 1993). One of the many benefits of experiential learning assignments espoused in the literature is the improvement of a variety of skills such as

communication and critical thinking skills (Harich 1995; Lamb, Shipp and Moncrief 1995; Williams, Beard and Rymer 1991). The one communication skill which receives the greatest attention in the marketing education literature is written communication (Chonko 1993; Corbin and Glynn 1992; Fisher 1990; Hansen and Hansen 1995; McNeilly and Ranney 1995). Suggestions for improving written communication skills include using *Writing Across the Curriculum* programs (Corbin and Glynn 1992), adding further requirements for technical and business writing courses, and considering interdisciplinary approaches to improving writing using English and business professors (McNeilly and Ranney 1995).

One popular learning activity assigned to marketing students in principles of marketing courses and even marketing strategy courses is the development of a marketing plan for a new or existing product, which allows students to work on their written communications skills as well as verbal communication skills, if a presentation is required. "A marketing plan is a road map for the marketing activities of an organization for a specified future period of time, such as one year, or five years" (Cohen 1995). Although marketing plans may be written for an internal audience as a guide for the direction of marketing activities or for an external audience such as a bank for the purpose of raising capital, there is no single "generic" marketing plan guideline (Berkowitz et al 1997). This paper proposes an improvement to the traditional marketing plan assignment by incorporating experiential learning theory into the new alternative *Marketing Plan Assignment*.

Specifically, this paper presents:

- (1) A summary of the importance of communication skills in marketing education.
- (2) Discussion of the trend toward experiential, interactive learning techniques.

- (3) Explanation of the experiential learning model used as a basis for the *Marketing Plan Assignment* proposed in this study.
- (4) Methodology of an empirical study of the *Marketing Plan Assignment*.
- (5) Results of student evaluations of the assignment proposed.
- (6) Directions for future research.

The Importance of Communication Skills

The importance of communication skills for marketing graduates entering the work place is well-documented in the marketing literature (Arora and Stoner 1992; Chonko 1993; Corbin and Glynn 1992; Kelley and Gaedeke 1990; Floyd and Gordon 1998; Hansen and Hansen 1995; Lamb, Shipp, and Moncrief 1995; McNeilly and Ranney 1995; Shipp, Lamb and Mokwa 1993). Although the relative ranking or level of importance of skills may vary somewhat in each study, a similar set of

skills typically emerge. Boatwright and Stamps (1998) suggested that communication, leadership, and self-starter skills (ambition and motivation) are important for marketing positions. Problem-solving skills and communication skills were also found to be important in a study of employers, students and staff by Floyd and Gordon (1998).

Trend Toward Experiential, Interactive Learning Techniques

The trend toward experiential, participatory, interactive learning actually dates back in time to educators such as Socrates who taught by asking questions, not reciting answers, and Dewey (1938), an American who believed that the starting point of education is experience, not abstraction. Experiential learning can best be explained by considering Table 1, which compares experiential and traditional learning.

TABLE 1
A Comparison Between Experiential and Traditional Learning

	<u>Traditional Learning</u>	<u>Experiential Learning</u>
<u>Student</u>	Student is passive Student as spectator Vicarious experience by student Low student involvement Low student commitment Less risk for student Impersonal Student as "empty cup"	Student is active Student as participant Direct experience by student High student involvement High personal commitment for student More risk for student Personal Student as "full cup"
<u>Teacher</u>	Teacher-centered Teacher has control Teacher's experience primary Teacher as transmitter of knowledge Teacher decision-maker Teacher knows Teacher responsible for learning Teacher as judge	Student-centered Student has control Student's experience primary Teacher as guide/facilitator to learning Student decision-maker Student knows Student responsible for learning Absence of excessive teacher judgment
<u>Learning/ Knowledge</u>	Predefined learning One-way communication Broadcast learning Goal of knowledge accumulation Stress cognitive processes Linear, sequential learning Instruction Predictable outcome Emphasis on pedagogy/didactics School as regiment Product (knowledge)-oriented Theory-based	Customized learning Two-way dialogue Interactive learning Goal of knowledge, skills, & attitude development Includes cognitive, affective, & behavioral processes Non-linear learning Discovery Outcome not always predictable Emphasis on learning School as fun Process-oriented Student's perceptions-based

Characteristics of the student (student as active, involved), teacher (teacher as guide/facilitator), and type of learning (interactive, non-linear learning) all assist in identifying the nature of experiential learning. A key component of all experiential learning is the *reflection* on the experience. Primary experience is the immediate, tangible aspect of the learning process, while secondary experience, or reflection, is the key to understanding (Hunt 1995).

Although the traditional, passive, one-way, teacher dominated *lecture* is still a prevalent teaching style for marketing educators (Clow and Wachter 1996; Roach, Johnston and Hair 1993), marketing education continues to move toward an active, experiential approach (Gaidis and Andrews 1990b; Harich 1995; Lollar and Leigh 1995; Stretch and Harp 1991; Titus and Petroschius 1993; Wright, Bitner and Zeithaml 1994). Experiential learning activities increase student involvement and motivation (Butler and Laumer 1992; Harich 1995; Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991), help students integrate theory and practice in order to make a connection with the "real world" (Haas and Wotruba 1990; Harich 1995; Karns 1993), improve a variety of skills such as communication and critical thinking skills (Harich 1995; Lamb, Shipp, and Moncrief 1995; Williams, Beard, and Rymer 1991), and increase student learning (Butler and Laumer 1992; Harich 1995).

Experiential Learning Model Used as a Basis for the *Marketing Plan Assignment*

Most learning models suggest that learning is a process as opposed to a single event (Bloom et al. 1956; Gaidis and Andrews 1990a; Joplin 1981; King, Wood, and Mines 1990; Kolb 1984; Solman and Rosen 1986; Stuart and Burns 1984). The most popular and frequently used model of experiential learning is the one developed by David A. Kolb (Henry 1989). Kolb's (1984) work is frequently cited in business and marketing literature (Dennehy, Sims, and Collins 1998; Frontczak and Rivale 1991; Jervis 1983; Lengnick-Hall and Sanders 1997; Ronchetto, Buckles, Barath, and Perry 1992; Sharp 1997; Sims 1983; Sims and Lindholm 1993; Sood and Adams 1984; White 1992; Wilson 1986; Zhao and Parks 1995).

The Kolb experiential learning model suggests that learning is a cyclical process that encompasses the following four stages:

- **Concrete Experience:** An actual, new experience in an individual's life.
- **Reflective Observation:** Feelings, emotions, reflection related to the experience.
- **Abstract Conceptualization:** Existing concepts and theories are applied to the experience.
- **Active Experimentation:** New concepts are generated, put in practice, tested and applied in new situations which leads to new experiences.

According to Kolb, to be an effective learner a person needs to experience all four stages and be skilled in all four aspects of the process in order to learn. Most individuals need practice and guidance in this process of learning. Kolb's model is used as a basis for the *Marketing Plan Assignment* proposed in this study. Since all stages are crucial to learning, the assignment includes all four aspects of the cycle. (See Appendix A for the *Marketing Plan Assignment* which is based on Kolb's model.)

Methodology of Study Using the *Marketing Plan Assignment*

For the experiential learning technique used in this study, several learning objectives were specified: (1) Improve students' ability to relate real world marketing strategy to classroom theories and concepts, (2) assist in student learning of marketing concepts, (3) allow students to experience the full cycle of learning, (4) encourage active student participation in the important skill of writing, and (5) turn a traditional assignment into a more experiential, interactive experience for the student.

Students in an undergraduate principles of marketing course completed the *Marketing Plan Assignment* outlined in Appendix A for an existing product of their choice. Students completed a four stage process of analysis which followed Kolb's stages of learning, (1) Concrete Experience, (2) Reflection, (3) Conceptualization, and (4) Experimentation. This procedure allowed the students to complete the entire learning cycle.

Often marketing plan assignments in marketing education are individual in nature and do not incorporate many aspects of experiential learning. Marketing plan assignments may include some features of experiential learning (See Table 1) such as "High student involvement," "Student has

students would recommend this learning experience for other marketing classes. The overall mean satisfaction with the *Marketing Plan Assignment* was 7.58.

Learning Relative to Standard Exams:

Results suggested preference for this learning activity relative to standard exams. Students believed that the *Marketing Plan Assignment* was more interesting than an exam and required more work than a standard exam. They strongly believe this assignment was a better learning experience than a standard exam. The overall mean of "learning relative to standard exams," was 7.91 for the *Marketing Plan Assignment*.

Conclusion / Direction for Future Research

In conclusion, preliminary findings on the use of the *Marketing Plan Assignment* for principles of marketing courses show support for this innovative experiential learning technique. The process outlined and used by students allows the assignment to become more interactive and experiential. Also, the students are more involved, active, and committed when they know that they will be sharing their writing, thoughts, and feelings with others.

In general, the primary benefits of this experiential learning technique included:

- (1) The *Marketing Plan Assignment* allows students to complete all of the stages of the learning cycle (support for the third learning objective of the study).
- (2) The *Marketing Plan Assignment* provides a way to make the traditional marketing plan assignment more interactive and experiential which can improve learning (support for the fifth learning objective).
- (3) The presentation of the project allows the assignment to move from *experiential learning* to *experiential education*. (Experiential learning is the process which occurs within the individual learner while experiential education occurs once the learner shares the experience in some manner with others.)
- (4) This experiential learning technique encourages active student participation in the skill of writing (support for the fourth learning objective).
- (5) The final important benefit is that students have fun with the learning experience.

- (6) Future research on the use of *Marketing Plan Assignments* using Kolb's four stage approach to experiential learning should test effectiveness of this technique with a larger sample of students. Grading procedures for this experiential learning technique could be improved. Finally, a comparison of student satisfaction and learning between the proposed *Marketing Plan Assignment* and a traditional marketing plan assignment would be useful.

APPENDIX 1 ***Marketing Plan Assignment***

Project: Your team will analyze the marketing plan for a current popular product or service:

Considerations for the selection of your product:

1. Product may be international, national, or local in focus.
2. Pick a product your team is interested in.
3. Select a product where you are likely to be part of the target market.
4. Consider products where information is likely to be available.
5. Choose a legal product.
6. Product must be approved by professor.

Marketing Plan:

1. Brief discussion of product/service
2. Situation Analysis
 - a. Industry Analysis
 - b. Organization Analysis
 - c. Competitor Analysis
 - d. Market/Consumer Analysis
 - e. Consumer Attitudes/Lifestyles
 - f. Economic Analysis
 - g. Legal Implications
 - h. Political Implications
 - i. Technological Implications
3. Target markets/Segmentation strategy
4. Positioning Strategy
5. Marketing Objectives
6. Marketing Program
 - a. Product Strategy
 - b. Pricing Strategy
 - c. Distribution Strategy
 - d. Promotion Strategy

Stages of Marketing Plan Assignment:

1. Describe in detail the entire marketing plan for your product (include references).
2. Evaluate all components of the marketing plan. Discuss your feelings, emotions, reactions toward all parts of the plan. (Team members do not have to agree).
3. Relate all components of the marketing plan to the concepts and theories discussed in the text or class.

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