

## EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES IN PRINCIPLES - A CASE STUDY

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The principles of marketing course is an opportunity to introduce students to the basics of marketing. While the specific objectives of the course vary by instructor, an unscientific review of a number of course syllabi and discussions with instructors suggest that three general goals are common. First, the course is viewed as attempting to provide students with a survey of the discipline. Second, principles instructors often view the course as an opportunity to build an interest in marketing among students who may still be uncertain regarding their major choice and ultimate career direction, in effect a sort of recruiting tool for majors. Finally, many principles instructors suggest that their course should begin the process of instilling analytical and critical thinking skills in their students.

This paper discusses the author's view, based on seventeen years of experience teaching the principles course, of the ability of a traditional lecture-format approach to accomplish the three goals described above. It then describes an approach to teaching principles which was designed to provide an alternative to the more traditional approach. The alternative approach was intended to provide an environment which would enhance achievement of all three of the goals.

### **The Traditional Approach**

The traditional approach to teaching principles of marketing typically involves heavy doses of lecture. Lecturing offers a logical means for providing students with a survey of basic material. An argument in favor of lecturing is that students must acquire a knowledge of content before that content can be used to think and apply. Lecturing, in combination with requiring students to read a textbook, can and does allow many principles instructors to achieve the goal of imparting a general knowledge of the field of marketing to their students.

Lecturing, however, is not the only means to accomplish this goal and, according to

some, not the best means. Educator David Perkins states: "The conventional pattern says that first, students require knowledge. Only then do they think with and about the knowledge they have absorbed. But it's just the opposite: far from thinking coming after knowledge, knowledge comes on the coattails of thinking. As we think about and with the content that we are learning, we truly learn it." (Perkins, 1992, 77)

A traditional lecture approach can also be effective in accomplishing the goal of creating interest in the discipline. There is no reason that lectures need be dull. Textbook publishers have provided instructors with many opportunities to spice up their lectures by making available a multitude of ancillary materials to accompany texts. Videos, slides, laser disks, transparencies, additional creative examples and the like are readily available to the principles instructor interested in enhancing his or her lecture notes. Furthermore, beyond the ancillary packages available from book publishers, marketing instructors typically find it quite easy to locate a wide variety of current material related to marketing that can be used to add interest to lectures. Any instructor, however, who has ever looked out at a mass section of principles and seen students reading the school paper or dozing recognizes that the spiciest of lectures will still fail to interest some portion of the class.

Finally, of the three goals identified at the beginning of this paper, the traditional lecture approach is most challenged by its ability to aid in instilling analytical and critical thinking skills in students. Lectures typically impart knowledge about content. Of course, a lecture course can be designed to include components that inspire critical thinking. Examinations, for example, can ask students to respond to questions that require it. Additionally, students can be required to complete assignments of some sort. The assignments might be short case studies for example. Such assignments typically build critical thinking skills. Hence while it is true that this third goal can be met with a traditional

lecture-type approach, the reality is, it is difficult. Many principles of marketing courses that use the traditional approach are large (more than 100 students). The instructors rely on test bank generated multiple choice and true false questions and few additional assignments are made (especially ones that involve writing). Research has shown that multiple choice and true false questions rarely require critical thinking on the part of students (Hampton, Krentler, & Martin, 1993; Krentler & Hampton, 1994). Class size discourages most principles instructors from using an essay exam format. Likewise, class size is the reason that few writing assignments are required in the typical principles course.

It can be concluded then, that the traditional lecture-type approach to teaching principles of marketing offers a limited ability to fully accomplish the three goals of imparting knowledge, building interest, and instilling critical thinking skills.

### **The Alternative Approach**

In an effort to enhance the likelihood of achieving the three stated goals in a large principles course, an alternative to the traditional lecture-type format was developed. The primary focus of the approach was small group work. A significant body of literature supports the value of such an approach in enhancing learning (Michaelsen, 1992; Feichtner & Davis, 1985; Michaelsen, Watson, & Shrader, 1985).

A class of 130 students was segmented into 26 five person groups. The groups were formed by the instructor on the basis of information provided on datasheets submitted by the students. Efforts were made to produce groups which contained diversity.

Lectures were scheduled in only one third of the thirty scheduled class sessions. Of those class periods, only six were devoted solely to lecturing. Hence the course placed very little emphasis on the traditional lecture approach.

Evaluation was done on the basis of three components: quizzes, case studies, and peer assessments. Quizzes were given every three weeks (5 total). They were comprised of

multiple choice questions from the textbook testbank. Each quiz was first completed and submitted individually by the students. The quizzes were then retaken by each group with the group being required to submit a single set of answers. Students were instructed to spend time in their groups discussing the questions, discussing the reasons they answered as they did on the individual test, and then deciding together what the correct answer was. This format was intended to test an individual student's knowledge of text material and to provide student's with the opportunity to learn from each other during the group test. The interaction between the students during the group portion of the exam was intended to produce analytic and critical thinking.

Each group was assigned the task of analyzing three case studies over the course of the semester. A single written analysis was submitted by the group for each case. The majority of a student's individual grade on the case analysis came from an overall evaluation of the content of the case. A small portion of the evaluation, however, was based on peer assessments of each individual's contribution. The groups were provided with some in-class time to work on their case studies.

The final component of evaluation came from peer assessments of an individual's contributions to eight small group discussion days. On discussion days each group was provided with a sheet of issues for discussion and instructed to spend the class period with their group sharing ideas. At the end of the discussion group members assessed each other, confidentially, on level of preparation, quality of participation, and quantity of participation. Students were instructed to view these discussion days as informal opportunities to share their thoughts on the issues, to hear what others had to say, and to learn from others.

No specific hypotheses were developed regarding the superiority of the alternative approach to that of a traditional approach in accomplishing the three goals common to principles courses. The alternative approach has not been tested directly, using a control group. It

has been attempted, however. The outcome may be of interest to many principles instructors.

### **The Outcome**

An evaluation of the course was completed by students during the last week of the semester. The students were asked to respond to statements using a 5 point scale based in Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree. To encourage comparison between the alternative and traditional approaches, statements were prefaced with the following: "Please consider this course in comparison to a more traditional 'lecture-type' course. Such a course would involve primarily attending class to hear lectures delivered by the instructor. You would be tested on the material in lectures and the textbook. The course might require some individual written assignments however there would be no group assignments and no small group discussions of material."

The alternative approach's success in imparting knowledge, as measured by the self-report assessment, "I learned more in this course," was equivocal (2.96). Average final grade in the course was higher in the class than in previous sections taught by the same instructor utilizing a traditional approach. This may be the result of confounding factors, discussed later, rather than amount of learning however. Students did report that they found the alternative approach slightly more interesting than a traditional approach (3.15). Students were not asked directly to assess the extent to which their analytic and critical thinking skills had improved as a result of the course. It may be notable, however, that students reported their frustration level to be higher with the alternative approach than what they would anticipate with a traditional approach (3.46). While the intent of the course was clearly not to frustrate students, it may be speculated that striving to think critically can be frustrating to students. Students also reported attending class more regularly under the alternative approach (3.42). Motivation was reported to be slightly less with the alternative approach than what the students would anticipate with a more traditional

approach (2.84).

It is recognized, of course, that the students' evaluations of these factors are likely to have been affected by measures not accounted for. Differences in individual student's skill levels and motivation and the personality of the instructor, for example, may well have affected the likelihood of a student to attend class.

Students were also asked to evaluate the various individual components of the course. For each component, students were asked to indicate their opinion on a 7-point scale based with "1" - a waste of my time and "7" - a valuable learning experience. The two course components most closely associated with a traditional approach and most clearly linked to imparting knowledge were individual quizzes and lectures. These components received an above average (4.88) and average (3.99) value rating respectively. Group quizzes, case studies, and group discussion days are course components more closely linked to instilling interest, analytical and critical thinking skills. These components varied in terms of their evaluations by the students. While group quizzes were evaluated the highest of all components measured (4.99), the case studies and in-class work days devoted to them were rated only average (3.86) or slightly below (3.74). Group discussion days, intended to stimulate interest and ideas by having students talk to each other about marketing issues were rated lowest of all course components (3.02).

Even taking into consideration other potentially confounding factors, these results appear to offer an equivocal view of the alternative approach. In fact, the general results of the effort were less promising than that. Class sentiment regarding the alternative approach was not positive. Written comments added to the evaluations were consistently negative. Hard working, good students in particular felt that the format allowed slackers to ride on their coattails. This offers a distressing alternative explanation to improved learning for the higher grades that the class earned. If such a criticism is indeed valid, it is particularly damning. It was obviously not an intended outcome that students who chose to could receive a decent grade in the

course despite doing little work.

The alternative approach produced a second distressing side effect that was not anticipated when the approach was developed. The amount of cheating and other unethical behavior that occurred during the course of the semester was notable. The most blatant offense in this regard pertained to group discussion days. As noted previously, groups were encouraged to view these days as informal opportunities to discuss marketing with peers. The groups were told they could conduct these discussions either inside or away from the classroom. It became apparent after the first discussion day that groups had formed alliances designed to "cover" for each other. A group member, for example, would miss a discussion day but be given credit for attending by his or her fellow group members. This was done by having the group members assess the absent member's performance and submit the assessments. Such instances of falsification were fairly easily detectable due to the fact that the absent member had not submitted an assessment of his or her fellow group members.

A related problem came with the peer assessments themselves. The students were uniformly unwilling or incapable of discriminating across the range of evaluation. Given a 1 - 5 scale to use for these assessments, the average peer assessment was between 4.75 and 5. Many students routinely gave everyone in their group a 5 for all parts of the evaluation.

Greater success with the alternative approach would appear to be possible if all students buy into it. In other words, students must be willing to do their share and all must have a desire to learn as a personal objective. Unfortunately these requirements did not appear to be met in the case described in this paper.

### **Potential Explanations**

Three factors may help to explain the outcome produced in this case. First, the class was an undergraduate, first-semester junior level course. The students may not have been sufficiently mature to handle the amount of freedom and responsibility for their own learning

that they were given. The approach should be attempted with graduate principles students to determine if the outcome might be different.

Second, being a required business course, the class was comprised of a large percentage of non-marketing majors. It is likely that for many of these students, their primary personal objective was to get through the course with as little work as possible. Unfortunately if they were grouped with hardworking, motivated students, this made it easy for them to accomplish that goal, at the expense of others.

Finally, class size is seen as a factor. While the initial belief was that the approach was possible with 130 students, in retrospect this may not have been the case. The problems associated with maturity and motivation could have been better controlled in a smaller class. With twenty-six groups, the opportunity to take advantage of the system was significant.

### **Conclusions**

Without a formal test, utilizing a control group, the alternative approach described here cannot be truly evaluated with respect to its ability, compared to a traditional approach, to accomplish the three goals discussed throughout this paper. It may be noted, however, that working to impart knowledge, create interest, and build critical thinking skills is important. While difference for the sake of difference is not necessarily better, committed instructors should continue to consider how well the activities in their courses accomplish all three of these goals. Striving for innovative approaches to teaching is always a worthy goal.

### **References**

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