

Crowdsourcing the Syllabus

Adam Mills (Loyola University New Orleans) <ajmills@loyno.edu>

Leyland Pitt (Simon Fraser University) <lpitt@sfu.ca>

Sarah Lord Ferguson (Simon Fraser University) <stl10@sfu.ca>

Today's economy relies on information, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking and interpersonal relationships. Yet many of our approaches to course design fall back on traditional approaches to content delivery that have not seen much conceptual innovation in decades. Professors create a list of topic areas, prescribe a set of readings to accompany each, and then the semester follows a predictable weekly pattern: students read the assigned textbook, article or case ahead of time, then come to class for either a lecture or discussion about that topic. There is nothing insufficient about this approach to course design as far as content is concerned, and educators follow this system because it ensures that the students are exposed to the collection of information deemed most important to the particular subject matter. This remains a fairly essential approach to introductory courses, where students must be exposed to the foundational content of multiple functional disciplines. At the same time, this approach to course design at its core leaves skills like creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking and teamwork up to the individual instructor to include in assignments or in-class methodologies. As students progress into senior electives, delivery may shift from lecture-based to discussion-based, but design remains essentially unchanged. In effect, educators trying to prepare students with the skillset and mindset necessary for success in today's business environment are forced to try to "fit" these educational goals into an outdated mold.

What this paper proposes is a re-envisioning of course design that starts from, quite literally, a clean slate. The pedagogical focus on the skills needed for today's students is explicit, rather than incidental. What is proposed is the crowdsourcing of the syllabus content. The syllabus is approached as a template that becomes populated with learning objectives and topical areas by, and for, the students. Below, we introduce the crowdsourcing of the syllabus for a section of a junior-level elective Consumer Behavior and Analysis course that met twice per week (Mon & Wed).

On the first day of class, students were introduced to the course and the subject of Consumer Behavior: what the discipline is about, why it exists, how it is used in business, and how it affects them in both their roles of consumer and marketer. Students were then informed that they would be responsible for driving the weekly subject matter, and were given the homework of coming back the following class with a list of topics they were interested in and wanted to learn about. They were encouraged to consider skills necessary for their intended careers, and search in a variety of places for this type of information: job descriptions, mass media, practitioner publications, syllabi from other institutions, textshare presentations, and so forth.

The second day of class was spent with students reading out their lists and the rationale and motivation for selecting particular topics. Each and every topic was listed on the whiteboard. While most students came with 8-12 ideas, there were more than 40 topics generated across the class. When the individual lists were exhausted, and students were exposed to each other's ideas, a class vote was taken wherein each student "ticked" with a whiteboard marker their top three

topics. The course syllabus was then populated prior to the third class, using the most popular topics from the class vote. For this particular section, the modules were: segmentation and customer profiling, customer benefit analysis, forecasting and market trends, purchasing patterns (online and offline), observational methods, service differentiation, post-purchase behavior, conversion costs, sourcing quality data for research, presenting and applying research findings, and the psychology of pricing.

Each week of class proceeded with three distinct stages: preparation, theory and application. For the first stage, students were given the homework of preparing a 1-2 page “executive brief” on the next week’s topic using a templated framework (Appendix A) prior to Monday’s class. In the second stage, the first class of the week (Mondays) was used for a theoretical discussion of the weekly topic. With all students having prepared a brief, the purpose of this class was to have students work through their notes collaboratively, with the goal of filling in the “gaps” in each other’s work. Each student brought a slightly different nuance and perspective to the topic,

so class discussion was used to highlight interesting points of similarity and difference between them. Students were encouraged to keep their own briefs open on their laptops, augmenting their notes with others’ as necessary. Students were also encouraged to prepare and ask questions about what they could not find on their own but that they wanted to know.

In the third stage, the second class of the week (Wednesday) was used to put the topic into practice using a hands-on applied activity. The professor prepared a unique activity for each week based on the chosen subject matter, drawing from exercises published in JME and MER.

In-class activities ranged from using excel to calculate conversion costs, to mapping out morning rituals to investigate brand loyalty and CLTV, to conducting interviews with friends about their refrigerators and medicine cabinets, to participant observation. One of the students’ favorite activities was “garbology” (from Damron-Martinez & Jackson 2017) where students anonymously brought in bags of clean trash, and then sorted through the items to create a customer profile of each bag, followed by trying to guess which of their classmates had brought it in. The final week of class was spent reviewing subjects covered, and students were asked to submit a reflection memo of their experience. Students mentioned being highly engaged in the course for three reasons. First, they felt ownership of the course material, since they had chosen of the topics. Second, they felt engaged in the weekly discussions because they had responsibility for working as a team to create both content and learning environment. Third, they felt motivated to engage with the material because of a sense of responsibility and accountability for bringing valuable content to share with classmates. The memos also included three self-report measures of learning (Appendix B). Students were asked to gauge on a scale of 1-10 their knowledge of consumer behavior and analysis, their comfort level with consumer behavior and analysis, and their confidence in their ability to apply their knowledge of consumer behavior and analysis, at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Averaged across all three questions (Appendix C) students an average score of 4.24 at the beginning of the semester and 8.60 at the end of the semester.

Appendix A: Weekly Executive Brief Outline

- The Big Idea: What is/are [x] all about, at the most fundamental and strategic level?
- Relevance: Why do we do [x]? How does it enable or empower marketers to make better

managerial decisions and/or create more value for internal or external customers?

- **Critical Content:** What are the top three things we need to know about [x], and why?
- **Best Practices:** How do we do [x]? This is a training guide, so be as detailed as you need to be.
- **Common Mistakes:** What are the most common oversights or mistakes many marketers make when doing [x]?

Appendix B: Reflection Memo Measures, Instructions

Please fill out each of the 6 boxes using a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)

At the Beginning of the Semester (August 2017)

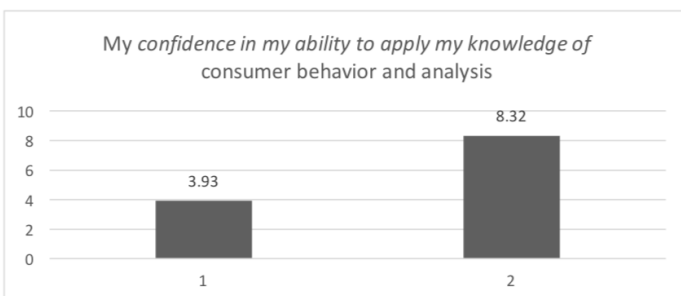
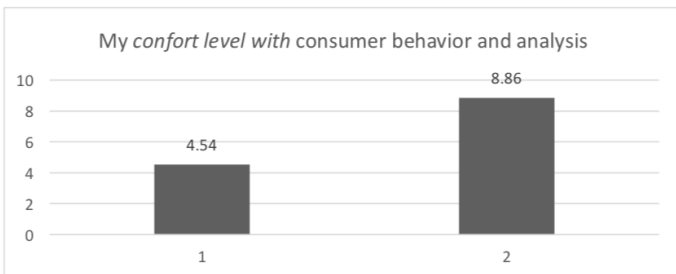
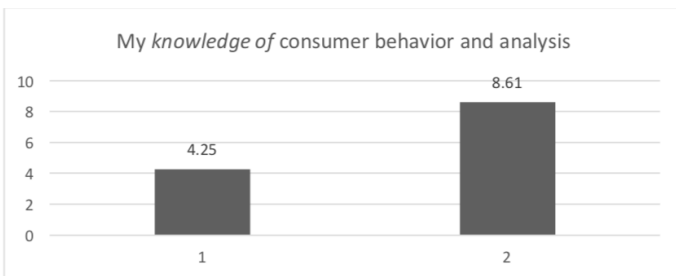
At the End of the Semester (December 2017)

My knowledge of consumer behavior and analysis.

My comfort level with consumer behavior and analysis.

My confidence in my ability to apply my knowledge of consumer behavior and analysis.

Appendix C: Reflection Memo Measures, Class Average Self-Report Metrics Axis labels: 1 (At the Beginning of the Semester) 2 (At the End of the Semester)



Axis labels: 1 (At the Beginning of the Semester) 2 (At the End of the Semester)