

Designing Experiential Learning Projects for Teaching Marketing Courses

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Abstract- Business schools are putting more emphasis on the improvement of teaching and learning methods to better prepare their graduates and meet the industry demands. This improvement has been sought through the use of face to face teaching approach blended with industry projects and experiential exercises. This study reports on a similar effort initiated in teaching the international marketing course in an undergraduate business program. An experiment is conducted in which a combination of face to face classroom and experiential learning project is used. Through this experiment, the author describes a semester-long, international marketing project that is structured to elicit active student engagement with international marketing course material and promote hands-on, real-world experience. Students learning enhanced tremendously as reflected in their papers and reports. The managers of the participating firms also appreciated the students' efforts. The participating firms benefited by getting objective views of some of their international marketing problems and issues.

Keywords-Experiential Learning; International Marketing; Industry Projects; Face-to-Face Lectures.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners-The exercise can be appropriate for a variety of undergraduate marketing courses and is especially beneficial in teaching international marketing. Instructors can promote better students satisfaction and consequently achieve good scores in student evaluations that are very crucial in decision regarding the promotion and tenure. Overall, this course delivery format is an attempt to meet the industry demands currently confronting marketing educators.

Introduction

Universities and colleges are under pressure to improve their efficiency and better prepare their students because employers and practitioners are not happy with the quality of transferable skills the graduates bring to the workplace (Finch et al., 2013). Specifically in the case of marketing and management graduates, scholars have reported that a gap exists between employer expectations of new marketing graduates and the skills these graduates bring to the workplace (Scott and Frontczak, 1996). This is because they lack the practical knowledge which is necessary to understand or fully appreciate the application of basic marketing concepts and principles in real life situations (Ryan et al., 1996). Surprisingly, more than a decade later, Schlee and Harich's (2010) study essentially mirrored the previous findings by suggesting that the employers have problems not with the knowledge content of marketing graduates, but the level of transferable skills which they possess. They blame the overall approach to education and learning for such shortcomings in marketing and management graduates.

One reason for the criticisms of management/marketing education could be that many courses are too theoretical and textbook oriented (Graham and Stewart, 1994). While understanding of theory is imperative, this is merely a means to the end of getting better at managing, rather than being ends in themselves (Casey, 1993). For this reason the use of active learning techniques has been recommended by practitioners and educators alike (for example Craciun and Corrigan, 2010; Karns, 2005; Laverie et al., 2008). Although, active and experiential approach is becoming a popular face to face teaching methodology for a variety of marketing courses, this approach also suffers from a number of inherent limitations (Whetton and Cameron, 1995). One solution to this pedagogical problem is to successfully integrate the traditional academic teaching and the intricacies of the real life business environment into an effective coherent teaching package (Gammie, 1995; Hunt and Laverie, 2004). Therefore it is important to evolve a teaching strategy in which two or more teaching methodologies or models are combined. Such synthesis of many of the strengths of various teaching models can stimulate students' cognitive competencies, develop transferable skills and eventually better prepare them to meet the challenges of real business world.

Answering the above call for the need for combining various teaching methods, this article reports the designing and delivery process of the international marketing course in an undergraduate business program. As part of the course design, an experiment was conducted in which, the course was delivered via face-to-face classroom style but combined with a semester long active learning based industry project and company visits. These projects and visits place the students in real life experiential learning situations requiring them to apply theory and principles learnt in the class environment to actual industrial circumstances and issues. The objective was to ensure that the students will be well prepared as they leave college to enter a highly competitive employment market. The result of the experiment was successful as measured via student evaluation, comments of the participating firms and their managers and other stakeholders. Against this

background the objective of this article to delineate the process of this successful course delivery experiment so that other academics can replicate the process in their respective courses.

The rest of the article is organized as follow. First, we describe the course in which the experiment was conducted. Second, we discuss the extant literature related to the effective teaching methodologies of business courses. Third, the overall process adopted for the course delivery and design is explained. Fourth, the implications and students' reactions to the teaching approach are presented. The article concludes with the discussion of limitations and direction for further research.

The Course

The course involved in this study is international marketing, taught in the bachelor of business program in a four years liberal arts state college. This is an undergraduate elective business course taken by students majoring in business administration and management in their junior or senior years. Only 24 students were enrolled in the course meaning small class size could be a good opportunity to experiment with the teaching innovation. The course unit is compulsory for students majoring in marketing and management, and optional for other areas such as international business, HRM, economics, advertising etc. For several years the course has been run largely on conventional lines with lectures, tutorials, computing based exercises and tests predominating. But the college was interested in introducing a non-traditional teaching approach in which more practical components could be incorporated in its marketing education program. The dean of the school and the president of the college were extremely supportive of the idea and offered funding for the exercise, if needed.

Literature Review: Most Effective Teaching Technique for Marketing Courses

How marketing and management courses can be taught at undergraduate level that would promote deep learning of managerial skills has been the topic of intense scrutiny in the extant literature. One marketing education approach is based on a teaching perspective (Soroan, 1993) which relies mostly on the traditional method of lecturing and tutoring and is mainly a classroom based activity. Lecturing is an effective way to transfer a wide variety of information in a relatively short period of time (Miner et al., 1984). However, retention of the material by the students is less in the long run (Van Eynde and Spencer, 1988). The lecture/tutorial format is predominant mode for marketing education all around the world. Another classroom based teaching approach is case studies in which students diagnose a particular set of problems in a written case. Though it is considered as a major

improvement over the traditional lecture format, the main problem with this approach is that students use a constructed scenario, not their own experience, as the basis for drawing conclusions (Argyris, 1980; Christensen et al., 1991).

An alternative approach is that of experiential learning, which is based on the concept of "learning by doing" (Kolb 1984; Van Eynde and Spencer 1988). Although experiential learning is not a new concept, recently it has become an increasingly popular teaching mode for a variety of marketing and management courses including marketing management (Conant and Mokwa, 1987), personal selling (Castleberry, 1989), marketing research (Bhattacharya and Sheth, 1996), principles of marketing (Drea et al., 1997; Gaidis and Andrews, 1990), marketing strategy (Razzouk et al., 2003), marketing ethics (Hunt and Laverie, 2004), consumer behavior (Morgan and McCabe, 2012; Titus and Petroschius, 1993), branding (Cracium and Corrigan, 2010), sales management (Young and Hawes, 2013) international business (Neiva de Figueiredo and Mauri, 2013), project management (Larson and Drexler, 2010), and for MBA courses (for instance, Lamond, 1995; Steigner et al., 2009).

Experiential learning in marketing education places the students in an actual environment where the students can engage directly in the activity under study. Bowen (1987) emphasizes the strength of experiential learning because students are involved in activities from which they can derive conclusions about how people behave and what behavior is the most effective. They can also provide deep understanding of why events occur and how people may react to the events (Miner et al., 1984). In addition, experiential learning exercises help students to confront problems; make decisions; understand conflict resolution; evaluate feedback; understand negotiation and bargaining and recognize, and perhaps change their attitudes toward a variety of marketing practices (Delozier et al., 1977). To further support the cause of experiential learning, many scholars have recommended client-based projects for marketing courses because this offers an opportunity to the students to interact with real business world and brings relevance and currency to the classroom (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985; West, 2010).

However, experiential learning cannot be regarded as the panacea for all educational needs because it suffers from some limitations. Firstly, experiential learning is best suited for students with some prior experience or familiarity with the subject matter and issues (Spencer and Van Eynde, 1986; Van Eynde and Spencer, 1988, Whetton and Cameron, 1995). Thus its usefulness may be restricted in undergraduate education, where students generally lack prior or practical knowledge. Secondly, less experienced students (which may be the case for undergraduate students) are particularly prone to the biases in an unguided experiential learning situation (Sadler, 1982). Thus, the experiential learning approach is not intended to be a substitute for more traditional methods of learning, but rather a supplement to those methods (Delozier et al., 1977).

No consensus has emerged in the extant literature because no single method is found to be superior in all situations. For instance, Miner et al. (1984) experimented with three teaching methodologies, experiential, case method and lectures and found no significant difference in students' comprehension of the of the subject taught. Similarly, McEvoy and Cragun (1987) compared the effectiveness of the experiential exercise approach and behavior modeling but could not conclude which was the best methodology. Lately, the use of more flexible and experiential based training with the help of industry-education partnerships appear to be gaining popularity at all level of business education throughout the world (for example see Finch et al., 2013). In addition, various studies of student perspectives and perceptions of marketing courses and pedagogy suggest that marketing students seem particularly receptive to the teaching activities that incorporate interaction, hands-on experience, and connection to the real world (Bridges, 1999; Karns, 2005; Davis et al., 2000).

One solution to the problem is to combine both traditional lecturing method and industry based experiential learning projects for undergraduate classes. This can be immensely valuable to the students and can facilitate the development of deep learning and transferable skills. Yet, this teaching approach is not new and has been used in several MBA, graduate and executive programs (e.g., see Berggren and Soderlund, 2011; Fischbacher-Smith and Fischbacher-Smith, 3013), but its application to undergraduate marketing courses is still limited. In summary, the extant literature related to marketing pedagogy is replete with the study of various teaching methodologies including case studies, lecture and classroom activities and experiential learning exercises. However, this literature base has not shown how the classroom based face to face teaching and experiential learning approach are combined for teaching an undergraduate international marketing course raising two key research questions that this study attempts to answer:

1. How to combine the face to face classroom instructions with industry based experiential projects and site visits in an undergraduate international marketing course? and
2. How effective this type of course delivery is in promoting student learning and achieving student satisfaction?

The Rationale and Objectives of the Course Delivery

There are several rationales for experimenting with the new course delivery and using international marketing course for this purpose. First, during our college's recent AACSB reaccreditation meetings, the accreditation team noted the lack of global issues in the courses taught in our school. They suggested adding action based projects in any global business courses that we teach. I took this recommendation as an opportunity and experimented with a new and

multipronged approach while teaching the international marketing course in our school. Second, a key impetus for developing this project as a teaching tool came from the students enrolled in the principles of marketing course in the previous semester. As part of the routine course evaluation, several students made an interesting suggestion, using a smart analogy. They said that they had learned a lot of ‘recipes’ in the class, but thought they would learn better if they had some opportunities to ‘cook’. They requested that we allocate less time to lecture and more time to work on marketing projects. Given that the students were already highly motivated to begin to apply their marketing knowledge, the idea of working with an actual client on a real marketing problem became an intuitively appealing pedagogical device. Third, research shows that students who participate actively in their own learning – who are challenged to think, debate and discuss – retain much more than students who are less involved. Fourth, due to globalization and increased global operations of American firms, the need for employees with cross-cultural awareness and skills is increasing (Dizik, 2009; Park and Harrison, 1993). Finally, practitioners frequently criticize fresh graduates’ presentation skills, negotiation approach, propensity to risk taking and the ability to apply theories to practice (Schlee and Harich, 2010). While seeking to hire new graduates employers usually look for a self-starter, i.e. an employee who can do the job with minimum supervision. Active and experiential projects play a key role in grooming a student into a self-starter.

Course Design and Delivery Process

Keeping the above criticisms in mind, I combined both traditional face to face lecturing methods with a major industry based experiential learning project as the most important and critical component of the course. It is a semester long project worth 50 percent of the overall course grade, in which the students are asked to write a global marketing plan for a product or service as part of a consulting project. In line with the recommendations of Gamie (1995), formal tests and class contact time are kept to a minimum with my role being to act as a facilitator, providing direction, advice and insight. Initially, traditional lecture sessions are organized which I cover a broad overview of the teaching plans, course outlines, assessment procedures, basic concepts and principles of international marketing and its interface with other areas of business. Students are also trained in the art of data collection and research during these class meetings. I give each student group a handout itemizing the project objectives and topics to be covered and a grading criteria sheet and rubrics both for written report and presentation. These documents allow for effective communications and give the students clear directions as they proceed with their work during the semester (Morgan and McCabe, 2012). After the first few face to face classroom sessions, students start the research for the global marketing plan for a product or service marketed by a local firm.

Inspired by Kolb's (1984) experiential stages of learning, I presented the semester long project over three phases. Each phase offered different dimensions to the students' learning and provided a variety of different opportunities to develop professional competencies in the global marketing area. For completing this project the students become a key player in a firm's decision making process and come face to face with specific global marketing problems where real world business rules and procedures apply.

Comprehension Phase

At the start of this phase the class is divided into teams comprising of three students in each team. Industry projects completed in a team environment have many advantages. For example, it develops student's problem solving, task completion, time management and leadership skills (Laverie et al., 2008). For the industry project, I selected a number of firms in the vicinity of the college that were involved in global business and marketing (participating companies have asked for confidentiality therefore their names are not revealed here). Assuming the role of a consulting group, each team selects a firm from the list and contacts the marketing manager, owner, CEO of their selected firm to obtain permission to write the project and seek relevant information about their product and businesses. The students have to go out and convince those firms on the mutual benefits of the process. They must develop rapport and establish a relationship with their respective firms by visiting the firms and meeting with the managers.

Next I simulate an "Executive Education Program" (a concept borrowed from various executive MBA courses offered by elite business schools) in the classroom in which the students acting as managers actively participate in several global marketing case studies to apprise them of the niceties of global marketing issues and techniques. In these meetings they participate in problem solving process via group discussion, debate and brainstorming sessions. They also learn the art of research, networking, negotiation and team building. Next each group schedules a 30 minutes interview with me to obtain preliminary information about the niceties of global marketing environment, entry mode strategies and discuss company, products, competitors and other relevant details.

Execution Phase

After having obtained preliminary information and learned the techniques of research, the students do not attend any more classes. Instead they go out in the field to get hands on experience and knowledge about global marketing. First, they contact several government and non-government organizations including, International Business Council, International Trade Administration, U.S Export Assistance Center, local freight forwarders, Small Business Development

Corporation (SBDC) and the international branch of local banks to obtain market information and the type of support that are available to the firms interested in global marketing. Next, they embed themselves as employees of the participating firms (i.e. their clients) and work on various global marketing activities. They also interview the managers, CEO or owners and other employees of the firm to obtain information about client's current overseas market portfolio and their global marketing initiatives. For this interview, they apply the techniques of qualitative research they had learned in the class. This phase of the project also enables the students to sharpen their networking skills. Next, they obtain company documents and conduct library research to collect data about the potential markets. Drawing on the knowledge gained from the above processes they then apply their ideas to develop recommendations about the selection of market, analysis of business risks and opportunities, finding overseas customers, obtaining loan and insurance for global business ventures and other marketing strategies. At the completion of this phase, the students write a memo to their clients highlighting their recommendations and seek critiques and feedback on their ideas. They incorporate the necessary changes and revisions based on clients' feedback and submit a preliminary report to me for grading, comments and suggestions.

Corroboration Phase

After getting detailed feedback and critiques from the clients on their reports, the students come back to the classroom to complete the third phase of the project, i.e., the corroboration phase. In this phase the students participate in several *Think/Pair/Share* activities, in which they offer critiques on each other's works in several group discussion sessions. To ensure that the students put their learning to work right away, they are asked to present their findings in the classroom acting as the representatives of a global marketing consultant, while all other students critically evaluate the recommendations acting as the clients. In addition, several practitioners selected from the local firms participate in the evaluation process and provide further critiques and feedback on students' submissions. Students find this system of evaluation given by their peers and the clients highly credible and valuable. Finally, the students incorporate the feedback and critiques into their final set of actionable and operational recommendations and send them to the participating firms as a professional and cogent consulting report.

Awards and Incentives

With the help of the participating companies, a competition is organized in which a committee comprising of client firms and other stakeholders select two top performing groups based on the quality of written report and presentation. The written report's evaluation criteria include, concise and clearly presented, easy and quick to interpret via visual aids such as charts, graphs etc. and useful

to the readers in accurately assessing situations and making business decisions. For the presentations students are evaluated on four criteria: innovativeness of presentation, lively and entertaining, enthusiasm and how well the audience is involved in the presentation. Under this arrangement two winning teams are awarded paid internships in their respective client firms over the summer break. As part of the internship the winning teams get opportunity to travel to the overseas markets of the client firm and learn the intricacies of global marketing and business challenges first hand. During their market visits they work as the employee of the firm and complete several global marketing tasks such as customer surveys and interviews, meeting with the dealers and distributors, negotiating franchise or other distribution agreements and contracts, participate in joint venture or other investment negotiations, learn to deal with the bureaucracy and government department in obtaining permits and licenses and may other similar activities. This award system further motivates the students to strive for perfection and achieve excellence in report writing. In addition, higher grade and good GPAs are the other motivating factors that boost the morale of the students and motivate them to develop a professional report.

Challenges in Developing and Executing the Project

One challenge associated with such a large scale project is monitoring the students' progress to ensure that they are on the task. To do so, I used several vehicles including in-class sessions assessments via group discussions and presentations, student reports and individual reflection papers at regular interval. To track the progress, I set milestones and asked the students to develop bi-weekly reports delivered in class and in writing. These regularly scheduled deadlines encouraged the students to maintain progress throughout the semester and minimize procrastination. Another challenge is to find and recruit the firms that are willing to participate in this type of industry projects. Although, we found that firms were forthcoming and willing to participate, a close relationship with the members of local business community is necessary for their participation. The teaching approach discussed in this article also requires, extra effort, time commitment and energy on instructor's part. Yet, the outcome and benefits of the course design justify the extra effort, time commitment and financial resources.

Results and Discussion

Although it may be difficult to measure student learning with scientific methods, increased learning was quite apparent especially after comparing the level of learning with past classes and other marketing courses. The real learning I have observed has been through the better quality written reports and group discussions that shows the understanding of theoretical concepts and how that relate to the real life applications. The students actively participated in their own

learning because they took the initiative to conduct research, analyze data and present findings. Throughout the semester they played the role of the managers in charge of global business planning, research and execution. They worked as a cohesive goal-oriented team and displayed the skills of a creative strategic thinker. Some of the key skills needed in a successful marketer such as, problem-solving, open communications, business acumen, leading without authority, multi-tasking and time management were apparent in most of students' papers, presentations, class exercises and discussions. We obtained student's feedback on the course design and delivery by conducting an ongoing informal assessment of students' satisfaction about different aspects of the course design. The majority of the students perceived the course design and delivery as both relevant and educational. They liked the classroom activities including face-to-face interaction and how it was blended with practical application via industry project. At the start of the semester, some students were nervous and anxious about the value of the course design. But at the end they considered the course and the project to be challenging and rigorous, yet very productive and enjoyable. They were surprised at how smoothly the overall completion of the project went and at how beneficial it turned out to be. Most of the students generally displayed sustained and high levels of motivation throughout, which were reflected in the end output such as presentations, papers, reports and discussions. Students considered working in groups a key strength of the exercise. They also valued the opportunity of applying theories, concepts and techniques to a practical environment.

To further assess the effectiveness of the course delivery and design, I gave an assignment at the end of the semester asking students to reflect on the most important concepts they had learned in the course. One student remarked: *I am confident to be a global marketer; I can start my own global marketing consulting firm; I can find new customers in overseas market and negotiate business opportunities with them.* Another student noted: *It is surprising to know that there are so many resources from both government and non-government organizations available to an international marketer that are free and absolutely valuable. My interest in pursuing a career in global marketing has increased because of this course.*

To formally evaluate the effectiveness of the course design and delivery and the overall value of company visits and industry projects, an anonymous questionnaire (i.e., the end of semester student evaluation) was used. Students were asked to respond to various items concerning the course teaching, delivery and design on a five point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neutral and 5 = strongly agree). They were also asked to rate the overall course on a five point scale (1 = very poor, 3 = satisfactory and 5 = excellent). Overall, the students immensely liked this international marketing course as reflected in their comments in the survey. For example, I received the score of 4.65 for the evaluation construct, "Recommend Instructor". I also added a separate question in the student

evaluation about the industry based active learning project: how well this project enhances your learning experience? The score was 4.90 (scale of 1-5, 5 being, extremely well). Students have also extensively commented on the value of the project and the depth of their learning due to the quality of the education materials covered during the completion of the project. Most importantly, several students have also now reported that their project was instrumental in getting employment because they used this project to showcase their global marketing knowledge, networking skills and talents in job interviews. Students have also appreciated the reward of paid internships in their respective firms. As part of that reward the two teams have already started their summer internships.

The managers of the participating firms have also praised the efforts and knowledge of the students. They took the reports seriously and decided to implement most of the recommendations suggested by the students. For instance, at least seven firms decided to export their products to several new markets in Asia that included some of the big emerging markets of the world for the first time. Similarly, three firms started negotiating franchise agreements for their new business ideas for some of the Latin American countries. At least two firms are already in an advance stage of negotiation for joint venture projects in Canada and Mexico. Further, the managers of all the participating firms were informally interviewed and were asked to indicate their satisfaction with various aspects of the projects and to indicate any aspects, which could be improved. On average the quality of the students' report exceeded their expectations. In conclusion, students' responses to the teaching evaluation survey, their informal feedback and positive response from the participating firms lead me to believe that my experiment with the course delivery that included a synthesis of high quality of classroom based face-to-face interaction and comprehensive industry project worked very well because it promoted actual learning of international marketing skills and knowledge.

Conclusion and Implications

For some institutions and instructors, greater reliance on the traditional lecture, tutorial and computing based simulation, with assessment by examinations and traditional assignments, may be tempting given the resource crunch, increased student intakes and time constraints. However, one general and significant problem with this system is that students learn passively and are unable to acquire transferable skills highly sought after by the employers. The teaching approach described in this article may overcome these impediments to students' learning. This approach appears to produce an enjoyable yet challenging learning experience. This may also facilitate learning and development of readily transferable business skills and techniques. Students work without close supervision, decide their priorities and among other skills, develop a team spirit. These qualities are considered important for both employers and students

themselves in meeting the challenges of real world marketing and management environment. In addition, the face-to-face instruction model for higher education is evolving rapidly and facing competitive pressures from alternative educational models such as on line classes, inclusion of the internet and various emerging technologies in education and training. Due to this changing landscape, the role of the instructors has changed as well. They need to focus less on introducing concepts and put more emphasize on helping students integrate, synthesize, and analyze the information presented to them via classroom instructions and other outside sources. Our course design and industry project is an effective means for achieving the international marketing course's pedagogical objectives discussed above and meet the growing challenges posed by new and evolving teaching models.

A successful implementation of the course design and delivery discussed in this article requires the colleges to forge stronger and closer ties with the corporate world. While business schools must be prepared to invest the necessary resources in promoting and designing industry projects, there is also a need for business organizations to encourage such an approach. However, as the students are the common link in any business school program, they must endeavor to give their best to the industry based exercises to win support and approval of the industry community. Commitment from all three parties to this approach of teaching and learning must surely be mutually beneficial. In conclusion, this article delineates the process of combining face-to-face instructions with industry projects that enhance student learning and challenge them to think and act as managers in an international marketing course. This approach can be a template to be used in other undergraduate marketing courses. The approach used in this article can assist marketing instructors in making their classes interesting and enjoyable. Due to the nature of the industry project, report writing and summary comments of participating firms it is easy to link the course objectives to learning outcomes and goals. This will assist in achieving the "Assurance of Learning Standards" of the accreditation agency such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with any study this one also has some limitations. First, the experiment is limited to an undergraduate international marketing course offered in face-to-face mode at one college. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to other courses, or in an online environment, and/or to the graduate level courses. However, the international marketing course is a typical undergraduate course offered at many colleges worldwide and therefore, the results may be applicable to other courses and institutions. We believe that marketing instructors will find this course design rather valuable because it is easily adaptable to a variety of undergraduate courses. Yet, further research on its effectiveness in enhancing student experience

and knowledge in a variety of different settings and institutions is necessary to confirm the true applicability of this course design and delivery. There may be differences in executing this approach for other courses depending on factors such as technicality of the course, availability of supporting instructional materials, feasibility of experiential field projects, expertise of the faculty, composition of the class and needs of the local companies.

Second, the availability of firms engaged in global marketing may depend on where the course is offered. Thus the geographical locations and availability of participating firms can be a key limitation. Third, the overall evaluation of the course structure and industry projects is based on the end of the semester student evaluations and survey of the managers of the participating firms. A more formal feedback of the students that have already graduated and working in the field will still be needed to further bolster the results discussed in this article.

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