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Rundle-Thiele, Sharyn & Kuhn, Kerri-Ann (2007) Do perceptions mirror reality? Student perceptions of learning versus grade outcomes. In *Academy of Marketing Conference*, London, UK: Kingston University.

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/49368/>

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Do Perceptions Mirror Reality?

Student Perceptions of Learning Versus Grade Outcomes

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Abstract

This research addresses whether educators should consider measuring if students have learned what was intended, as recommended by education researchers. Students in an Introductory Marketing subject were asked to complete a voluntary survey rating their own progress on the intended learning outcomes for the course. One hundred and one surveys were completed by students in the second-last teaching week of the semester. Student identification numbers were used to link student perceptions with their grade outcomes. Regression analysis was used to ascertain whether student perceptions of their progress on the intended learning outcomes for the course could be used to predict their grades. While the results were significant, student perceptions of their progress on learning outcomes were a poor predictor of grade outcomes. The results of this study suggest that student perceptions may not mirror the reality. These results are somewhat surprising and future research examining the degree of change in the learning outcomes perceived by students is warranted. This will further contribute to decisions surrounding whether educators should measure if students have learned what was intended.

Track: Marketing Education

Key words: Education, learning, constructive alignment, learning outcomes

Introduction

The marketing education literature remains largely driven from a teacher- rather than a student-centred perspective. Researchers suggest that if we are to understand learning, a student's viewpoint is important. As recommended by Pratt (1997), to understand the effects of teaching on student learning, marketing educators must move beyond seeking to understand teacher and teaching method competence. Research needs to consider the students' learning experience, as it is this which should guide course design. Methods that directly consider student perspectives on the activities of teaching and learning will enable marketing educators to develop a richer understanding of the contributions of various learning activities to the achievement of specific learning outcomes (Karns 2005).

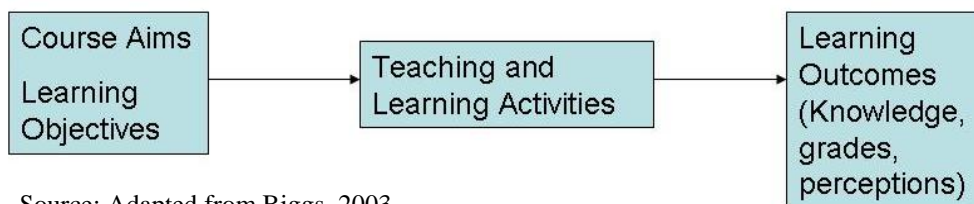
In addition to measuring student satisfaction with the quality of teaching received, Engelland (2004) suggests marketing educators need to evaluate whether students have learned what was intended. By seeking to understand student learning, marketing educators can receive diagnostic information that can result in actionable changes. Researchers heeding this call (name withheld to ensure anonymity during the review process) have demonstrated how student perceptions of their own achievement of learning aims can provide insightful information to inform curriculum development. While complementing course and marketing educator evaluations, student perceptions of the learning experience provide additional insight, identifying from a student perspective which course aims are being met and which aims can be improved.

Student perceptions of their own achievement of learning aims however would be even more meaningful if the perceptions mirror the reality. This paper reports research that relates student perceptions of their achievement for intended learning outcomes to the grades achieved in a first year Marketing course. This research will assist us to understand whether a higher perception to achievement of learning objectives actually translates to higher achievement overall.

Literature Review

There is significant debate in the marketing education literature concerning the most effective way for students to learn and the role of marketing educators in the learning process. Biggs (2003) has been influential in the field of tertiary teaching with his work in the area of what he calls ‘constructive alignment’. The basic premise of constructive alignment (illustrated in Figure 1) is that the curriculum is designed so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned in order to support students to attain the outcomes intended for the course. This concept suggests that students are responsible for their own learning. In fact, Chonko (2003) advises the most important thing marketing educators can do is persuade students to take full responsibility for their own education. This requires their active participation to manage the process (Loranger 1994). If students construct their own learning, then it makes sense that the real learning can only be managed by them. In light of this view, the higher education literature (e.g. King 1993) prefers educators to think of themselves more as ‘guides on the side, not sages on the stage’. This role leaves educators in charge of coordinating the activities required to facilitate the learning experience and adopting the necessary supportive learning strategies.

Figure 1: Constructive Alignment



Source: Adapted from Biggs, 2003

As a starting point marketing educators can align their courses by determining what the students must become able to do. In practice this can be a difficult task. Research into learning outcomes has identified that business students perceive interpersonal skills, leadership, and global economy issues to be most important (Duke 2002), while practitioner’s value creative thinking, communication, interpersonal, leadership and teamwork skills (Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer 1990; Kelley and Gaedeke 1990). Marketing faculty on the other hand consider a number of other skills to be important such as management (decision-making and leadership), cognitive (problem-solving and critical thinking), communication, bridging (cross-cultural competence and foreign language) and interpersonal skills (which they rank as being more important than do practitioners) (Hyman and Hu 2005). Decisions concerning learning outcomes should consider multiple viewpoints including educator, practicing marketer and student views, in addition to other stakeholders e.g. parents and

society as a whole. Multiple perspectives are required since education serves multiple customers (Bayer 1996).

Once the required learning outcomes are determined, marketing educators then develop the course aims and objectives to achieve them. Without clear goals and tasks it is unlikely students will be able to use their skills and abilities, and will probably lack the willingness to apply effort (Archer and Schevak 1998; Campbell and Campbell 1988). Setting clear expectations however provides alignment between the objectives intended by the instructor, and the inputs and outcomes sought for the student (McKone 1999). Research shows that clearly stated aims and objectives that emphasise learning increase intrinsic motivation (Stipek 1996; Young 2005), enhance performance (Campbell and Campbell 1988) and improve perceptions of instructor effectiveness (McKone 1999).

Next, teaching and learning activities must be designed to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Karns (1993) found the use of guest speakers in lectures to be students' most preferred learning activity, followed by class discussions. His follow-up study (2005) revealed multiple-choice tests and field trips to be most important, with internships, class discussion and cases analysis identified by students as activities that contribute most strongly to learning. Overall, a variety of tasks are needed to enhance student motivation, learning engagement and satisfaction (Ames 1992; Blumenfeld 1992; Lengnick-Hall and Sanders 1997; Yair 2000). O'Toole, Spinelli and Wetzel's (2000) study also suggests students as well as educators feel the delivery of material is an important learning dimension. Young (2005) advises that an active application-orientated experience delivered by enthusiastic faculty, who provide high interaction and supportive feedback is important. A good deal of research exists to assist educators to design teaching and learning activities. These research endeavours however have tended not to consider how the teaching and learning activities actually improve learning outcomes for students.

The final step in successfully aligning a course is to evaluate learning outcomes. While prior research has considered student perceptions of learning, researchers have not focused on understanding whether students have learnt what was intended. Rather than directly measuring student performance, marketing education researchers have tended to rely only on student perceptions of outcome achievement (Duke 2002). Maher and Shaw Hughner (2005) for example considered student perceptions of their learning to compare simulated and real client assessment items, finding no (statistically) significant difference in student perceptions for the activities considered.

The higher education literature acknowledges the importance of constructive alignment to inform curriculum design and redesign, but a review of the marketing education literature suggests that to date, there are few studies that seek to understand whether students perceive that they have learned what was intended and indeed whether this approach is warranted at all. Further, no study appears to have been conducted in the marketing domain that compares perceptions to grade outcomes. Young, Klemz and Murphy (2003) investigated the effects of learning styles, instructional technology, instructional methods and student behaviour on learning outcomes, including students' perceived learning performance, pedagogical affect and grade, but even here the relationship between students' perceived learning performance and grade was not examined. The absence of such studies appears to be a serious oversight since students are a focal point of the constructive alignment concept. If they are integral to the process, then their perceptions must be measured in order to perform effective evaluation. At the same time however, it is necessary to evaluate the validity of these perceptions against

measurable outcomes. Grade is an obvious choice and has been used in other studies (e.g. Brokaw and Merz 2000; Devadoss and Foltz 1996; Romer 1993; Young et al. 2003).

This research responds to several gaps in the literature. We seek to compare student perceptions of performance against specific intended learning outcomes, with the grade itself. We present the methodology next.

Methodology

Mark spreadsheets and a learning outcome survey were the two sources of data used to consider whether student learning perceptions mirrored academic performance in a first-year Introduction to Marketing course. This course had a 16-week duration, with contact options for students that comprised thirteen 2-hour lectures, 10 one-hour tutorials, and a one-hour essay-writing workshop. Student marks for assessment items were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for the purpose of calculating an overall grade for the course. Student marks for the course could be between 0 and 100%.

A questionnaire based on recommendations by Pratt (1997) focussing on student learning was distributed in lectures in the second-last scheduled teaching week of the semester. The questionnaire contained one seven-point item for each course aim and objective (learning outcomes). Students were asked to rate their progress for each course aim and objective using a 7-point scale where zero was none, one was little, and seven was extraordinary progress (see Appendix 1). Students had received feedback on their first three assessment items at the time of rating. Individual written feedback was provided for each piece of assessment.

The questionnaire also consisted of a further four open-ended questions to gain feedback on what students considered was particularly helpful to their progress on the stated aims and objectives, what else could have been done to facilitate their progress in the course and students' assessment of any additional learning in the course, including its importance to them. The survey focussing on student learning was voluntary and students were not required to provide their student identification numbers for ethical reasons¹. Student identification numbers were used to link data collected in the survey to the students' grades.

A total of nine learning outcomes were identified for the Introduction to Marketing course. The outcomes were classified as content (knowledge), cognitive and application outcomes (see Table 1 below). Four assessment items were designed and weighted in an attempt to meet the stated course aims and objectives (identified as 1 to 4 in Table 1). Two items (1 and 2) worth 15% each (total 30%) were team projects requiring students to develop a solution for a real-world marketing problem. Student teams were assessed on their 5-minute presentations in scheduled tutorials. The third item was an individual essay (30% of course marks) where students were asked to discuss whether beer marketers are responsible for the way consumers use their product. The final item (4) was an exam (40% of the marks) comprising 5 short answer questions directly testing the outcomes, as well as one case study which required students to analyse and evaluate a marketing opportunity and then formulate an innovative solution for the problem (learning outcomes 5 and 7).

¹ Student identification numbers permit students to be personally identified and given the researchers were teaching the course students were allowed the option to withhold their student identification number.

Table 1: Intended course learning outcomes

Content Outcomes	Cognitive Outcomes	Application Outcomes
1. Know that marketing starts and ends with customers and consumers (1, 2 and 4). 2. Appreciate the responsibilities of marketers in our society (3). 3. Understand the importance of market research in the marketing process (1, 2 and 4). 4. Appreciate the role of marketing in business (1, 2 and 4).	5. Analyse and evaluate marketing opportunities (1, 2 and 4). 6. Critically evaluate, at a basic level, marketing issues and the marketing literature (3, 4).	7. Formulate, at a basic level, innovative solutions to solve marketing problems (1, 2 and 4). 8. Use oral skills to persuade a target audience (1, 2) 9. Participate as an effective member of a team (1, 2)

The student sample

Five hundred and forty-eight (548) students were enrolled in the first year Introduction to Marketing course. Of the 548 students enrolled 520 received grades. The remaining 28 students either withdrew from the course after enrolment dates or deferred the final exam. A total of one-hundred and one (101) learning outcome surveys were returned², representing a 19.4% response rate. Of the returned surveys, twenty-six did not provide their student identification number, which precluded these 26 cases from regression analysis.

This course was compulsory for all first year Bachelor of Business students and an elective for others. There were 248 Bachelor of Business students enrolled in the Introduction to Marketing course (therefore the course was compulsory for approximately 48% of students enrolled). The remaining students came from a wide range of programs, though the majority were studying a Bachelor of Commerce, a Bachelor of International Business or a combined business degree. The number of males and females was approximately even, with the majority of students ranging in age from 18 to 23 years.

Data analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to consider whether grade outcomes could be predicted from student perceptions of learning. Multiple regression analysis is the appropriate method of analysis because grades are a single metric dependent variable, which may be related to student perceptions (see Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black 1995).

The bulk of the analysis and discussion is focused on the learning outcomes derived from the student perceptions and grade data. The open-ended questions serve to support or discount findings from the analysis.

² Attendance in lecture classes in the final weeks of semester was very low and this is reflected in the low response rate for the student perception survey. Attendance at lectures is encouraged but was not compulsory this course.

Results and Discussion

Student perceptions of their own progress

The learning objectives for the Introduction to Marketing course are summarised in Table 2, along with student perceptions of their progress on each of these objectives.

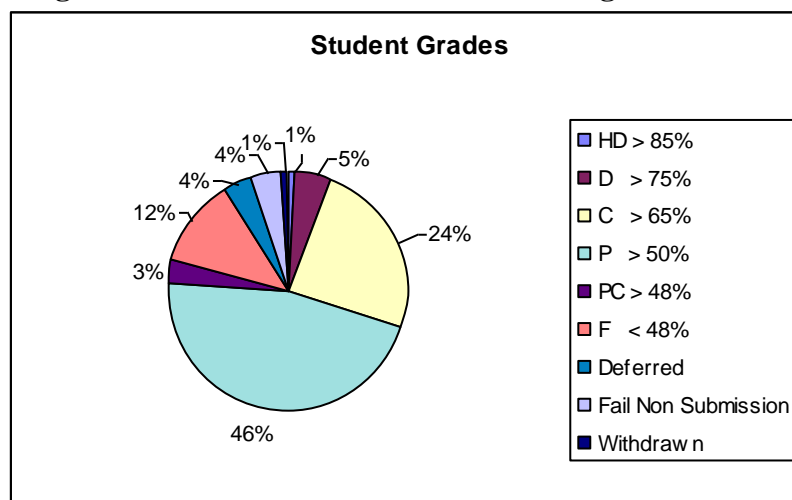
Table 2: Descriptive statistics (n=101)

	Course aims and objectives	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Perception 1	Know that marketing starts and ends with customers and consumers	4.07 (1.00)
Perception 2	Appreciate the responsibilities of marketers in our society	3.89 (0.92)
Perception 3	Understand the importance of market research in the marketing process	4.45 (0.93)
Perception 4	Appreciate the role of marketing in business	4.00 (0.93)
Perception 5	Analyse and evaluate marketing opportunities	3.59 (0.97)
Perception 6	Critically evaluate, at a basic level, marketing issues and the marketing literature	3.55 (1.05)
Perception 7	Formulate, at a basic level, innovative solutions to solve marketing problems	3.63 (0.96)
Perception 8	Use oral skills to persuade a target audience	3.70 (1.16)
Perception 9	Participate as an effective member of a team	4.33 (1.10)

In general, students who completed the learning survey perceived they had made average (3) to good (4) progress on the stated course aims. These results indicate that students perceive there is considerable room for improvement to attain excellence.

While students completing the survey felt they had developed a good understanding of the importance of market research in the marketing process and that they were able to participate as an effective member of a team, they felt they had only developed an average ability to critically evaluate marketing issues and the literature, and an average ability to analyse and evaluate marketing opportunities. These perceptions were somewhat indicative of student performance in the course, illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Student grades for the Introduction to Marketing Course



Six percent of students achieved a high distinction (HD) or distinction (D) in the course, 24% received a credit (C), 49% a pass (P) or pass conceded (PC), while 16% of students who enrolled failed (this includes students who failed as a result of not submitting a piece of assessment). The marks suggest that more than two-thirds of the Introduction to Marketing course gained a credit or pass. Overall, this suggests the majority of students demonstrated an adequate or high-level understanding, with a smaller proportion (6%) demonstrating a complete and comprehensive understanding.

Do perceptions mirror the reality?

The data were analysed by multiple regression, using as regressors the students' perceptions of their own learning outcomes, perceptions 1 through 9 (see Appendix 1 for perception measured). The regression was a very poor fit ($R^2_{adj} = 15.5\%$), but the overall relationship was significant ($F_{9,61} = 2.423$, $p < 0.05$). With other variables held constant, student marks were positively related to the students' perception of their ability to participate as an effective member of a team, with marks increasing by 2.68 for every point in the perception scale. The Get Marketer Challenge was a group project accounting for 30% of total marks and students perceiving an excellent ability to participate as an effective team member achieved higher grades. These results indicated that efforts to promote effective teamwork (e.g. asking students to rate their team's effectiveness and then compare their ratings with their team mates following the first Get Marketer Challenge) should remain in the teaching and learning activities.

The effect of the students' perception of their ability to participate as an effective member of a team was the only significant effect ($t = 2.370$, $p = 0.02$), although the effect of the students' perception to formulate innovative solutions to solve marketing problems approached significance ($t_{61} = 1.876$, $p = 0.065$), as did the students' perception of their ability to critically evaluate marketing issues and the marketing literature ($t_{61} = 1.70$, $p = 0.09$). The line of best fit showed a positive linear relationship between the student perception of their ability to participate as an effective member of a team and their grade: the higher the perception, the higher the mark tends to be. The low model fit may suggest the intended outcomes are not sufficiently aligned with the teaching and learning activities occurring in the course.

Some students identified additional learning outcomes for this course, noting that they had learnt something about different industries in teaching and learning activities, that marketing can be adapted in every business, marketing is everywhere, marketing influences their own lives, and that developing effective marketing strategy is significant for business performance. This suggests that a review of the learning outcomes for this course may be warranted to ensure the outcomes intended and the teaching and learning activities are more aligned.

Should we expect student learning perceptions alone to predict student grades?

The results of this research suggest that perceptions are not strong predictors of grade outcomes for students. The inability of student perceptions of learning outcomes to predict the grades received suggests that success in a University course is a complex phenomenon likely to be driven by a myriad of variables, many of which are likely to interact with each other. Indeed research seeking to predict success in tertiary study highlights the importance of myriad variables. For example, pre-enrolment performance measures or tertiary entrance

scores, language ability for foreign students (Spinks and Ho 2004), the choice to perform, level and persistence of effort (Campbell and Campbell 1988), the level of financial assistance, student work/life pressures (Young et al. 2003), support for the student, teaching strategies, and student approaches to study have all been identified as key factors that can predict success (or course performance) at University.

What changes were required as a result of this analysis?

Student feedback suggested the assessment schedule needed to be changed to provide more time in between the two challenges. The schedule has been changed and the time between challenges has been extended by two weeks.

Some students advised that two Get Marketer Challenges was too many. This feedback was considered by the teaching team and the decision was made to continue with two challenges in future course offerings. A key driver behind this decision was that some students indicated two challenges were necessary as they learnt a great deal from the first, and enjoyed the opportunity to apply this knowledge as part of the second presentation.

A final modification that was made for the second offering of the Get Marketer Challenge was to increase the prizes available to the overall winning team. It was felt this would better reflect the level of effort expended by students participating in the final rounds of the competition. In the first year, student teams had the opportunity to win a prize valued at \$200 for each challenge. Sponsorship has increased in the second offering and the winning team will receive a \$500 cash prize and the offer to undertake work experience in Marketing with the sponsoring organisation. Negotiations have resulted in a further increase in prize value for the third Get Marketer Challenge offering with a prize value of \$AUD 1,000 and the opportunity to gain work experience at the Gold Coast Indy for a winning student team.

Conclusions

Student perceptions of learning outcomes can explain a proportion (15.5%) of the variance in grade outcomes. While researchers have advocated the need to consider whether students have learned what was intended, measurement of perceptions alone will not assist educators to explain student performance. The results of this study suggest the students' ability to participate as an effective member of a team contributed towards their academic performance in this course. Higher education researchers (e.g. Biggs 2003) suggest students learn from teachers, peers and on their own, with each agent serving a different purpose. For example, teacher controlled activities are useful for prioritising content, imparting and clarifying information, and providing feedback to deepen understanding, while peer activities are particularly useful for broadening understanding by providing different viewpoints and helping students to obtain self insight through comparing with others.

The results of the current study must be viewed in light of some key limitations. Firstly, the student sample is small and larger samples are required. Secondly, the results of this study must be viewed in light of the fact that on average, students perceived an average performance that was reflected in grade outcomes. A lower proportion of high achieving students occurred in the course (e.g. 6%) when compared to typical grade distributions (15% achieving a distinction to high distinction is considered normal). A third limitation is the timing of the survey. Student perceptions of learning outcomes were measured in Week 12, a little over two weeks prior to the final exam. It is likely that additional learning occurred

during study for the examination and following completion of the exam, where answers to questions were compared with peers and grade feedback was supplied. Administration of the perception survey at a later point in time may have resulted in different perceptions. A final limitation of this study is that perceptions were measured at one point in time (the end of the course). It is possible that student perceptions may not have varied as a result of taking the Introduction to Marketing course. A more appropriate measure may be to measure perceptions at two or three points in time during the course to identify the degree of change (and hence learning) that students perceive they have attained. If students do not perceive a change, then perceptions of learning outcomes are not likely to predict grade outcomes.

Further opportunities to extend our understanding of the relationship between student learning perceptions and outcomes are available. Firstly, an understanding of the student's academic and professional background would allow us to understand whether students had prior marketing experience before this introductory marketing course (e.g. some students may have studied marketing in high school) and whether this experience influenced perceptions and outcomes. Secondly, further consideration of the student population would provide further insight. For example, students electing to study the course may have different perceptions from students who were compelled to study the course.

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Appendix 1



1003MKT Student Evaluation

Using the scales below, please rate your own progress on each of the course outcomes. These are the course learning outcomes that were given to you at the beginning of Semester in the course outline.

		None	Little	Some	Average	Good	Excellent	Extraordinary
1	Know that marketing starts and ends with customers and consumers	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	Appreciate the responsibilities of marketers in our society	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
3	Understand the importance of market research in the marketing process	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
4	Appreciate the role of marketing in business	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
5	Analyse and evaluate marketing opportunities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
6	Critically evaluate, at a basic level, marketing issues and the marketing literature	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	Formulate, at a basic level, innovative solutions to solve marketing problems	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
8	Use oral skills to persuade a target audience	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
9	Participate as an effective member of a team	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Please comment on what has been helpful and what else would facilitate your progress for these objectives.

1. What was particularly HELPFUL to your progress on these goals?
2. What else could be done to FACILITATE your progress on these goals?
3. Within this course was there something else you learnt (in addition to the goals above) that was particularly important?
4. Why is that important to you?