Is it a Bird, a Plane, a Guest Speaker? No, it's Mr Beare!: Using Hot-seating Through Puppetry to Immerse Students in Marketing Scenarios

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Abstract

'Hot Seating'- where an actor in-role is questioned by an audience - and 'Puppetry'- an inanimate object being 'brought to life' - are two educational drama techniques. In this exploratory study, final-year marketing students interviewed a corporate client, in the form of a lecturer-operated puppet. The simulated dramatic context was an open briefing where teams competed for the right to design and market an island resort for gay and lesbian consumers. Reflective diaries were analysed for student perceptions of learning. Interpretive findings suggest that students, using this technique gained: (1) practical skills in client relations, (2) exposure to professional responsibilities and consequences and; (3) experience in 'learning by doing'. Findings offer marketing educators innovative, sustainable techniques for engaging students.

Introduction

This paper explains and examines the fusion of two educational drama activities – 'Hot Seating' and 'Puppetry' – herein referred to as 'Hot-seating Through Puppetry' (HSTP), to facilitate engagement among millennial students (students born between 1980 and 1994). The paper documents how HSTP was incorporated into a final-year, undergraduate marketing elective that allows students to explore contemporary marketing issues, such as controversial products, ethics and 'pink marketing'. Preliminary findings are presented from an exploratory study into student perceptions of HSTP and its possible contributions to student learning.

The educational purposes for using HSTP were fourfold: (1) introduce a new face into the classroom; (2) enable students to simulate the experience of participation in a client briefing; (3) allow students to interact with a character from a case reading, thereby learning through drama and; (4) cover content regarding an example of a market sub-culture (gay or lesbian consumers). The research objectives of the study were to explore student learning insights and ascertain if HSTP had any unique and beneficial properties as an educational technique.

According to a founder of the 'drama for learning' movement - Dorothy Heathcote (1977, p.43) - 'educational drama' is: 'anything which involves persons in active role-taking situations in which attitudes, not characters, are the chief concerns'. Other useful definitions emphasise that educational drama is: (1) 'the play that is developed by a group, as opposed to the one that abides by a written script' (McCaslin, 1996, p.8); and (2) 'an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centred form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experiences' (Davis and Behm, 1978, cited in Woodson, 1999, p. 203).

Drama conventions

'Drama conventions' are defined as: 'indicators of the way in which time, space and presence can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meanings in theatre' (Neelands and Goode, 2005, p.4). Various drama conventions are categorised into four groups (Neelands and Goode, 2005, p.6): (1) Context building action – 'setting the scene' or adding

information to a dramatic context; (2) Narrative action – telling a "story" or "what-happens-next"; (3) Poetic action – creating symbolism; and (4) Reflective action – using "soliloquy" or "inner thinking" within dramatic context.

Hot-seating, a form of 'Narrative Action', is described by Neelands and Goode (2005, p.32) as 'A group working as themselves or in role, have the opportunity to question or interview role player(s) who remain in character'. Neelands and Goode (2005) cite cultural connections and learning opportunities for hot-seating. Cultural connections include courts, chat shows and true life confessions, whilst learning opportunities embrace highlighting a character's motivations and personality, showing how events affect attitudes and encouraging reflection on human behaviour.

Puppetry

Much of the general literature on puppetry has considered its use in therapy, entertainment, community work and education. For instance, puppetry has been successfully as an educational vehicle for social change in prevention programs for HIV AIDS, prison rape and domestic violence (Freidman, 2005). Despite writings on puppetry in education by drama in education authors such as O'Toole and Dunn (2002) however, a review of existing literature reveals a paucity concerning puppetry's application in higher education marketing contexts. One of the few accounts of puppetry in marketing education is offered by Pearce (2005) who documents the use of student operated puppetry as a means of facilitating active learning in teaching services marketing at an Australian university. Similarly, whilst hot-seating is a commonly cited technique in applied theatre literature, no articles are apparent concerning the use of a puppet as an alternative to a conventional actor or guest speaker.

Puppetry can be utilised for a variety of classroom purposes, including providing mystery, humour and tangibility (O'Toole and Dunn, 2002) and rising above the ordinary, the uninteresting and the fearful (Sinclair, 2000). As is the case with games and simulations, puppetry offers an alternative to lecturing which, more often than not, transmits knowledge to a passive, listening audience. Questioning the value of reception learning (Ausubel, 1978) and advocating learning through fun and games, Leigh and Kinder (1999, p.1) assert: '…many people do not find it easy to learn from hearing information, but prefer to learn through involvement and active engagement of their senses'.

Given renewed calls for marketing educators to innovate (Ackerman et al. 2003; Cunningham, 1999; Wee et. al. 2003) and meet the particular needs of millennial students (Pearce and Braithwaite, 2008), puppetry is but one way of potentially making learning memorable, stimulating engagement and attracting learner attention. On this latter point, the propensity of puppets to attract attention is indicated by Sinclair (2000, p.3) who argues that puppetry can '…educate people who might reasonably ignore the same material when presented in another fashion'.

Furthermore, as a pedagogical instrument, puppetry projects feelings and thoughts onto others (O'Toole and Dunn, 2002), facilitates the crossing of any type of cultural barriers - religious, linguistic, social or racial (Freidman, 2005), enables things to be said that could not be expressed by human actors (Anonymous, 1996), and has a unique ability to connect with all manner of people at a childlike level (Sinclair, 2000). It is further claimed by Sinclair (2000) that the use of puppetry fosters a verdant learning environment that offers students opportunities for making decisions, exploring experiences, interacting with others, learning about role play, learning through discovery, learning particular skills, learning from others,

manipulating an environment, handling materials, and creating something worthwhile. Such claims suggest that learning through puppetry is informed by theory from a number of fields, including experiential learning through play (Bruner, 1966, 1972; Piaget, 1962) and theatre in education (Jackson, 1980, 1999; O'Toole, 1976).

Methodology

HSTP was one of approximately 20 drama conventions used in the unit, which employed improvised drama as the dominant pedagogical approach. The rationale was facilitating safe simulation of experiences and situations from which students could create personal meaning as an alternative to being taught through more conventional, teacher-centred instruction.

Over a 14-week semester, students voluntarily participated in seven, weekly, three-hour drama workshops. HSTP, an original activity designed by the lecturer, also a co-author of this paper, was conducted in the second last drama workshop. HSTP ran for 25 minutes and comprised three stages: (1) 'Preparation', where students read a short case, were randomly allocated into consultancy teams of five students and told they were about to meet the client and central figure in the case – Mr Marcus Beare. Students were informed the client was a soft puppet (manipulated from behind using a hand to operate the mouth) and briefed on their roles as consultants meeting with a client whose firm was appointing consultants to design an island resort catering for gay and lesbian consumers. Prior to doing the drama, students were not told what they were expected to learn; (2) 'Acting-out' a simulated briefing with the client, where they asked questions and 'sold' the client and; (3) 'Debriefing', including a discussion on lessons learned.

A reflective diary, submitted in the last class, was one of three unit assessment items and comprised learning reflections from eight classroom drama activities, one of which was HSTP. For each diary entry, students were guided to comment on: (1) what they learned; (2) emotions experienced 'in role'; (3) how the drama affected them and; (4) if/how the learning differed to 'conventional' teaching practices.

Fifty-one students enrolled in two classes at two campuses in a single semester for the unit, of which 18 students (35% of unit population) reported HSTP. Responses were anonymously and randomly labelled as HSTP 1 to 18. Using thematic analysis, verbatim comments relating to the four guiding questions were counted into themes to ascertain their salience and relative importance.

Findings and Conclusions

Findings are depicted in Table 1.

*What did I learn? T*welve themes were identified (Table 1), in roughly three groups of descending importance. Acquisition of specific marketing knowledge (group 1) (in this case on the 'pink' market) was substantially the most-mentioned, demonstrating the convention's ability to deliver a core learning outcome. The second most-mentioned group of themes (2, 3, 4 & 5) concerned students' learning of how to prepare for and conduct themselves in a business meeting. With this group scoring 46 mentions, it can be argued that this learning outcome was the most salient. Themes in the third group (6 – 12) were each substantially less mentioned and concerned person- or situation- specific knowledge gained.

Table 1: Findings of 18 Reflective Journal Entries on HSTP

What did I learn?	
Theme	**Count**
1. Specific marketing theory/market/ customer knowledge	25
2. Work within client's vision/don't conflict/be tactful/diplomatic	16
3. Don't ask irrelevant questions/do prior research/use time wisely	12
4. Need for professional behaviour/business etiquette	11
5. Clients can be blunt, demanding, even rude	7
6. Prepare and present as a team	6
7. How to see new perspectives/views/think outside the box	6
8. Winning business is very competitive/demanding	6
9. Need for creativity and differentiation from competitors	5
10. Need to establish confidence/rapport with client on a personal level	4
11. How to overcome nerves & gain self-confidence	4
12. How to suspend disbelief & imagine a situation	3

How did I learn through drama?	
Theme	**Count**
1. Felt immersed in a real life situation with real responsibilities & consequences	32
2. Taught me how & why to project myself/behave professionally in a business setting	19
3. Allowed me to observe, compete with and learn from others' perspectives	11
4. By taking responsibility for/empowering my own learning & my/my team's achievement	8
5. Tapped into and fired my imagination/think outside the box	4
6. The environment and use of humour made the activity comfortable, enjoyable and fun	3
7. Opportunity to apply theoretical learning with practical application	3
8. By changing the teacher-student learning dynamic	2

How did I feel in-role?	
Theme	**Count**
1. Felt (+ve) in myself confident/professional/competitive/aggressive	34
2. Felt (-ve) in myself nervous/pressured/lacked confidence/not enjoyed it	25
3. Felt immersed in the drama	13
4. Felt (-ve) affected nervous/embarrassed/intimidated by client's behaviour	10
5. Felt (-ve) affected by other teams' behaviour	6
6. Felt (-ve) affected by my team colleagues' behaviour	5
7. Felt (+ve) affected by my team colleagues' behaviour	3
8. Felt (+ve) affected by other teams' behaviour	1
9. Felt (+ve) affected proud/immersed in character by client's behaviour	0

How did I feel this method compared with conventional teaching approaches?	
Theme	**Count**
1. Opportunity to actually participate in/learn about/rehearse/adapt in a real business meeting	18
2. Learning and remembering by doing/applying/feeling, not just reading/seeing/hearing	13
3. Puppetry provided variety and a unique difference to other classroom drama	10
4. Challenged/dared me to immerse myself/suspend my disbelief/preconceptions	7
5. Two-way interactivity and/or engaging of emotions	7
6. Allowed me to watch and learn from others and gain immediate feedback and validation	5
7. Stimulated/inspired further research/reflection/synthesis &/or discussion outside class	3
8. The experience created personal meaning for me	2
9. Painless learning - so immersed we didn't realise we were learning & acting simultaneously	2
10. Built my confidence and self-esteem	2

How did I learn through drama? Eight themes were identified, with a steep gradient of counts spread across four groups. 'Immersion' in the business meeting, with perceived responsibilities and consequences, was substantially the highest-mentioned. If this theme is combined with the second related theme (professional etiquette/behaviour), then the situation-specific setting of the drama is most salient.

How did I feel in-role? Students were clearly challenged on a personal level by the convention, which stimulated both positive and negative emotions (shown in Table 1 as either "+ve" or "–ve" respectively) - sometimes intensely. The most-mentioned single theme was a positive individual feeling (e.g. confidence). Overall, however, negative feelings outnumbered positive ones (47- vs 38+). Perhaps tellingly, the client's influence was negatively perceived.

How did I feel this method compare with conventional teaching approaches? This question generated ten themes, with mentions spread fairly evenly and none dominating. 'Participation/doing', i.e. application of learning was the most mentioned theme. Use of the puppet scored third highest. Students were clearly engaged and interactive during the activity.

Sustainability aspects associated with HSTP include: (1) enhanced abilities to create new characters according to contemporary issues/events (e.g. terrorism); (2) does not suffer from guest speaker burnout/unavailability and; (3) saves on resources – time/energy spent sourcing, briefing and managing guest speakers.

Unlike typical class presentations performed to other students and/or lecturers, which are familiar, comfortable and unreflective of real-world situations, puppetry enables students to be placed in unfamiliar, challenging and realistic contexts, e.g. salespeople pitching to prospects. Human guest speakers, while valuable, may be too polite to students, cannot be controlled and may speak 'off brief'. In contrast, puppet 'characters' are detached from the lecturer's persona, thereby adding teaching dimensions that are controllable, flexible and valuable.

This qualitative study serves as a starting point for exploring and understanding marketing student perceptions of learning through an alternative form of hot seating; one that incorporates puppetry. Rudimentary puppetry skills, discussions of which are outside the scope of this paper, are relatively easily acquired. HSTP fills an apparent curricula gap in that senior marketing students have still not learned how to prepare for and conduct themselves in business meetings. This shortcoming is perhaps best captured by the following quote, 'No other core marketing unit actually teaches us how to interact with a client…seems the university has let us down in that sense…as it is a practical skill we will need everyday in work…' (HSTP #15).

Two other examples of how HSTP could be used include: (1) a puppet representing an unethical marketer is interrogated by students in role as a compliance panel and; (2) a puppet as an advertising executive is quizzed by students from an organisation considering appointing the agency.

One limitation of this study was that it comprised only 18 students in a single unit. A second limitation was researcher subjectivity in thematic analysis. Future research might involve larger samples and quantitative analysis of themes identified here. Further application might be into other units within the marketing discipline, e.g. strategic planning, and/or to postgraduate students, who may have different expectations and learning needs. Other disciplines, e.g. accounting and management may also benefit.

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