

## **Enhancing practical skills: Reflections on real case experience**

*Patricia Fulcher Murdoch Business School, P.Fulcher@murdoch.edu.au*

*Dr Megan Paull, Murdoch Business School, M.Paull@murdoch.edu.au*

### **Abstract**

This paper outlines reflections and a short peer evaluation of a live case study approach to a marketing management unit at undergraduate level. The value of a practical case approach for enhancing student skills is highlighted as are some of the lessons learned in the design and delivery of the unit. The paper offers reflections and a peer review which focus on the key elements of the live case. It outlines the adjustments which will be made at the next offering of the unit, and offers insights for others contemplating such projects.

### **Keywords**

**case studies, undergraduate, experiential learning, group work, reflection, student centred**

## **Enhancing practical skills: Reflections on real case experience**

### **Introduction**

Reflective practice and peer review are increasingly promoted in the development of better teaching and learning opportunities for students (Bell, 2001). Similarly, lecturers are encouraged to experiment with opportunities for student directed learning (Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001). Lecturers also provide leadership to offshore partners and/or create collaborative teams with their transnational colleagues, and can use reflection to develop their leadership strengths (Brent and Matheny, 2000). Reflective practice and peer review as mechanisms for deepening the learning of the lecturer, increase the benefits of student centred learning.

Business graduates need to be “job ready” when they leave university and the dissatisfaction of employers is identified as significantly high (ACCI and BCA, 2002). Business educators are seeking ways to develop undergraduate skills (Jackson, 2009). At second year undergraduate level, a significant proportion of the students in a marketing management unit have limited experience and are just coming to terms with the concepts, ideas and application of the core components of their discipline. A unit in marketing management, where a marketing plan is constructed for a non profit “live” case study, provides them with a gentle transition or an eye opening experience, from the realm of student to practitioner.

The use of written case studies is well documented while the evidence for the benefits of using live case studies is still growing. (Elam and Spotts, 2004; Kennedy, Lawton and Walker, 2001). This paper reflects on a live case study approach employed in a semester long marketing undergraduate unit which applied the concepts as the students learned them, while at the same time exposing a nonprofit organisation to a new way of looking at their whole marketing approach.

### **Background**

#### **The Live Case Organisation**

The Bridge Association of Western Australia (BWA) is a membership based nonprofit voluntary association with 3500 plus members across some 30 clubs. New to Western Australia, the lecturer joined a local club of the association as part of her strategy to settle into a new community. While made to feel welcome it became apparent that new faces were rare. A conversation with the state promotions manager revealed that membership numbers were declining, making the future of the association of concern to the state committee. Many fundraising and profile development activities had been tried, but these efforts had been time consuming, expensive and disheartening in their outcomes. At about the same time, the lecturer took responsibility for the unit which is the focus of this paper.

#### **The Unit Overview**

The lecturer started with Murdoch in January 2009, to start teaching in February 2009. Previous iterations of the unit, a second year undergraduate unit which is a core requirement of a major in marketing in the Bachelor of Commerce degree at Murdoch Business School, had experienced problems; a total redesign was needed. The unit was to run both onshore and also offshore in Singapore and Malaysia at four other campuses.

Key to the success of students in this unit is the opportunity to grasp some of the theories and concepts that will help prepare them for the complexities of marketing planning; in particular, the writing of a marketing plan as it might be provided to a client or within a business.

Specific learning objectives were created for the unit which included as follows:

- *Understand the application of marketing theories, concepts, and tools in a commercial work environment.*
- *Have the tools and insight needed to create a basic strategic marketing plan and successfully implement it.*
- *Be able to differentiate and identify areas of corporate social responsibility within the marketing planning process. (Murdoch University, Unit Guide, 2009, page 4).*

The content of the unit was organised to be compatible with the identified text book and to roll out in a manner which would fit with the live case study. Timetabled to be delivered in a lecture/tutorial format to a large group of students, the classes introduced a concept in a lecture, had the students work on an ongoing development of a marketing plan and bring their unfolding work to weekly tutorials for discussion and refinement.

Guest lecturers were invited to add variety and create an environment that would simulate live examples (e.g. department heads providing insight into different areas of the business). Topics included nonprofit organisations and volunteering. A team from the nonprofit organisation, including the president, the promotions officer and a youth representative, delivered their views on what was required to increase membership. This presentation was videoed and placed online allowing subsequent use by students, in Perth and on the other campuses.

A total of four unit assessments were created, one being the end of semester exam, however the focus was on a group based “live case” marketing plan which made up 40% of the overall assessment. The first assessment, in a format similar to one to be used for sections in the final marketing plan, each student had to summarise an article they had found, define and explain the concept it depicted and discuss the application for 15% of the final unit grade. A further 10% per individual for their part in the group presentation, the final ‘pitch’ of the plan, where groups had a ten minute window to convince the audience that they were the best team to hire.

### **The Marketing Plan Project – A Live Case Study Approach**

The choice of a live case study takes much deliberation and for it to translate well into the classroom situation (Elam, and Spotts, 2004). There needed to be a good starting point as background for the students, albeit a written background or mini case, which an article by Stern (2007) provided, clearly elucidating, including statistics, the state of membership in bridge worldwide. It needed to translate into international classes. It needed a factor that enticed and motivated the students to want to participate and get all the affiliate lecturers involved.

Therefore the same case was deliberately chosen for all campuses in Perth, Singapore and Malaysia which totalled one onshore lecturer/Unit Co-ordinator, four campuses, seven classes, four affiliate lecturers, and approximately 400 students in total. This meant the one case had to translate across borders, be able to be managed by all lecturing staff and provide a platform for the learning outcomes of students. All tutorial sessions were conducted by the respective lecturers.

The same case meant students were able to link the experience with real life as if each student group were a “marketing company” up against other marketing consulting companies. This therefore provided rich peer learning opportunities. The class and group discussions, activities and exercises were further enhanced by this commonality. For the lecturer, the same case provided a contextual base and all offshore affiliate lecturers were able to work with the Unit Co-ordinator based in Perth, as a collaborative team sharing information.

A non profit organisation was chosen as it provided students with the experience of the marketing constraint of little or no budget. Thereby isolating learning around achieving marketing objectives cost effectively and creatively. Understanding about volunteering provided insights into an aspect of marketing which is undergoing renewal as the traditional images of volunteers and volunteering are challenged and broadened (Schlee, Curran and Harich, 2009, Pedicini, 2008). A corporate partner was approached to provide a marketing prize to the top group and demonstrated corporate social responsibility to help a non profit get the benefit of the student marketing plans.

Groups were formed and were required to act as marketing consulting companies. Many did not take up this challenge and some did not grasp the intent at all. Many did not come up with a group name even by the due date. Relevant theoretical marketing concepts were introduced using a semester long tutorial guide given to the students at the first tutorial and in their unit guide. If groups followed this guide and successfully planned their project they were assured of assimilating all the necessary theory to achieve at least a passing grade.

The culmination of the project was a day of panel judging of the 4 best “pitches” from group assignments. A lecturer-selected fifth group of outstanding presenters from groups that did not make the final were specially coached to provide a best practice example e.g. from content, walking on stage, delivery and slide design. The panel comprised; a representative of the local business prize donor, two representatives of BAWA (the state promotions manager and the president), the second author of this paper as an academic with an understanding of nonprofits, and the lecturer.

On the day of the final presentations to the judges, many students were included in the “event management” thus demonstrating that the organisation and preparation was not confined to the marketing pitch and plan. All of those who participated as presenters or volunteers in the final “event” were recognised by way of a certificate - another valuable message.

### **Lessons learned: Reflections from the lecturer**

In the beginning the students reactions ranged from astounded to confused, as the majority knew nothing about the game of bridge. Some thought the project was about bridges as in “Golden Gate”. Then there was widespread – “but why are we doing that?” The complexity of the case focussing on a nonprofit organisation and therefore having no budget did not really surface until they had seen the BAWA presentation. The first two lectures and tutorials piqued their curiosity, however, and over the course of the next few weeks understanding visibly rose along with their enthusiasm. So much so, that other lecturers started to comment as students were talking about the case in their lectures. It then became a task to keep students focussed on the main issue of identifying the target market and developing the strategy as it became obvious that many identified marketing with merchandising and not much else.

A ‘make-do’ approach had to prevail at times with the outcome being that creative and innovative approaches to problem solving emerged. Extra information at times needed to be provided as knowledge gaps appeared e.g. additional resources on report writing. The quality of the plans submitted was varied though the keenness was evident.

Whilst there is extra work involved for a lecturer in finding, preparing and liaising with the client in a live case study situation, it is nonetheless worthwhile. This is reflected in the enthusiasm portrayed by the students and the gratitude of the representatives of the nonprofit organisation.

There is an increased demand on the facilitator to always watch out for opportunities to relate, share and create links from the theory to practice; thus making this a worthwhile interesting challenge. Even now the facilitator is still involved with commitments to BAWA to ensure

they get the most benefit from their willingness to be involved. As it is the first time this unit has run in this format there is a further need to reflect and reorganise some segments.

There is a great opportunity to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach including team teaching in the overall unit design, which the guest lecture spots went some way towards. An ongoing challenge will be identifying new and appropriate live case studies for each year.

### Next time

A public relations (PR) policy for the unit is currently being written for next year as it was identified early that neither the client and/or the students fully understood contractual or brand issues. The policy will be used as a guide for the client to ensure that they do not publicise information without prior approval of the university and they take the project seriously. It will also seek to demonstrate to the students the need for such a policy within the workplace and in order to stop students approaching the client outside the project.

Time was not planned in the semester schedule for a proper full debriefing to ensure all aspects of the learning were fully recognised and understood by the students. Therefore the lecturer/facilitator did not get feedback for in depth reflection either apart from a standard student survey. Translating the learning experience through the student eyes would provide much needed richness for future iterations.

At offshore locations the student groups were formed by the lecturer, whereas onshore the lecturer allowed some to self-select and others were guided into groups. The lecturer kept an informal note on those groups that self-selected vs. those who received direction and it would appear the latter is the best method. The students devised their own group charter and group action logs; so much of the learning around group work was left to chance. A few groups had problems, particularly those that self-selected, and only then did they realise how ineffective their charter and log were. Clearer guidelines and a recommended format will be provided in the future.

More lessons could be learnt from a greater focus and a formal review of the collaboration with offshore lecturers. In this case communicating the underlying values to be achieved by the students required much discussion and debate with a varied amount of success. This is beyond the scope of this paper, but certainly an area for further investigation.

### Preliminary student feedback

At the time of writing formal student feedback using the university's teaching evaluation processes was not available, but preliminary feedback from students indicates success:

*Wanting to further my marketing knowledge and practical understanding of the basics I had learnt in previous units, I took on BUS214 with the hope that it would do exactly that. But it didn't, **it went beyond just improving**. The assignments weren't merely theory-based papers, they were based in reality and had all the challenges associated with them. The lectures and tutorials tied in well so that learning from both activities was possible. [bolding added in by authors] (Student R)*

*This unit has been one of the most interesting and challenging unit for me this semester. I enjoyed being tasked to do a mock plan for a real organisation. This **makes the project more tangible** and eliminates possible ambiguous factors to consider. [bolding added in by authors] (Student S)*

*At the end of the semester, this unit was one of those where **you came out having both a practical and theoretical knowledge**. Also at the end, the BAWA presentation made BUS 214 stand out of other business units and introduced the students to more insights about what marketing as a career would consist of. I feel more confident now when I think that in future I would have to do marketing plans, at the start of the semester the very idea used to scare me as it appeared to be intimidating. [bolding added in by authors] (Student- P)*

## Peer Evaluation

Peer review has been conducted by a participant observer in that the peer reviewer had a minor role in the programme. A guest lecturer early in the process, and a judge on the final panel, the peer reviewer was also a sounding board for the Unit Co-ordinator/lecturer over the course of the unit.

Development of a unit includes a process which has been outlined by Stark and Lattuca (1997, cited in Jackson, 2006, p 68) as having eight components. These eight points were used as part of the peer review process for this approach to the unit.

**Purpose:** Clearly the goals and objectives are met and in some cases, exceeded with this being demonstrated by the comments cited above.

**Content:** The unit relied on a traditional text book for content but then built on that, and students have been able to see beyond text book learning.

**Sequence:** The lecturer has decided to “reorganise” the sequence to enable progress through the development to the plan and the pitch to be achieved a little earlier. This will enhance the students’ ability to pull together their draft and provide peer feedback earlier, but it will also help the lecturer to better manage the marking load.

**Learners:** It is clear that some elements of the learners’ capabilities will need to be addressed early in the semester. (e.g. There was inconsistent prior exposure to report writing across the group).

**Instructional resources:** As the unit grows a range of additional instructional resources will be developed to assist other lecturers and tutors involved in unit delivery. Questions raised by offshore lecturers, for example, could be incorporated into an FAQ section online not visible to students, as could a discussion forum.

**Instructional processes:** The week by week process of meeting with groups appears to have been successful, although some groups perhaps did not take advantage of this process and sought appointments outside class time as the deadline for submission drew near. There was evidence, too, that some elements of feedback were not taken on board by some groups (e.g. a group who made the “final four” who were reminded not to stand behind the lectern did exactly that). In formative assessment processes there will always be some elements of feedback which are lost, but it may be appropriate to examine how more of the feedback message can be received and acted upon.

**Evaluation:** At the time of writing the formal university evaluation processes associated with student feedback have not been finalised and so these will need to be considered and opportunities for further improvement identified. However, the live case study approach appears to be a success which can only get better.

**Adjustment:** Clearly adjustments are already being made.

It is evident the approach outlined in this paper has been successful. Students are looking for ‘employability’ as one of the outcomes of their time at university, and employers are looking for practical skills. In addition the rote or surface learning which can sometimes take place in university study has been replaced by a deeper learning which has evolved from both the application of theory to practice and from the need to work with peers to develop a mutual understanding of what is required and how it relates to assignment goals.

## References

- ACCI and BCA see Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Business Council of Australia.
- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Business Council of Australia. 2002. *Employability skills for the future*. Canberra: AGPS.
- Bell, M. 2001. Supported Reflective Practice: a program of peer observation and feedback for academic teaching development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 6(1), 29-39.
- Brent, M, Matheny J. 2000 Self-Reflection: The source of personal and leadership development. *Organisations and People* 7 (4) 2-10
- Elam, LR, Spotts, HE. 2004 Achieving Marketing Curriculum Integration: A Live Case Study Approach. *Journal of Marketing Education* 26 (1) 50-65
- Jackson, SE. 2006. The influence of managed care on the US Baccalaureate nursing education programs. *Journal of Nursing Education* 45(2) 67-73.
- Jackson, D. 2009. Undergraduate management education: Its place, purpose and efforts to bridge the skills gap. *Journal of Management and Organization* 15 206 -223
- Kennedy, EJ, Lawton, L. Walker E. 2001 The Case for Using Live Cases: Shifting the Paradigm in Marketing Education. *Journal of Marketing Education* 23 (2) 145-151
- Murdoch University. 2009. BUS214 Marketing Development and Planning Unit Information Guide. Perth: Murdoch Print.
- Pedicini, C. 2008. Opening address: Catch the new waves. Speech to the 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Volunteers, Gold Coast Qld (Sep 3-5). *Australian Journal on Volunteering* 13(2) 8-9
- Schlee, RP., Curren, MT Harich, KR. 2009 Building a Marketing Curriculum to Support Courses in Social Entrepreneurship and Social Venture Competitions. *Journal of Marketing Education*. 31 (1) 5-15
- Stern, D. 2007, November. The Future of Bridge – Is there one? *Australian Bridge Federation Newsletter*, page 3.