

Lifting Student Engagement in Marketing Classes

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Abstract

High levels of student engagement have been linked with better student learning outcomes, such as the quality of their output. With marketing students accounting for a high percentage of business school undergraduates, it is important that the level of engagement is determined and drivers of engagement identified. Marketing has traditionally been delivered in a teacher-centric model, as opposed to a student-centric model which better encourages independent learning. Important aspects of the latter model are interactivity, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experiences. The author conducted focus groups with business students, and preliminary findings reveal that the instructor's approach and the nature of the assignments do affect student engagement. A preliminary model of student engagement is proposed which will be tested in the quantitative research phase.

Keywords: engagement, marketing students, drivers, focus groups, reflective papers, interactivity

Introduction

Four colleagues in the School of Business won a university grant to study student engagement at the undergraduate level. The research aims to establish the extent of student engagement and identify the drivers of student engagement. Approximately 20% of students major in marketing and a very high percentage of students undertake at least one marketing subject. The findings will be used to shape the School's learning and teaching efforts across all discipline areas. The paper commences with a brief review of the student engagement literature and proceeds to describe the use and findings of focus groups. Next, the paper outlines how the author, in an attempt to lift engagement, has experimented with the structure of marketing classes, the delivery of material and the nature of the assessment tasks. Finally, the findings from the focus groups and the marketing class experimentation are brought together to develop a preliminary model of student engagement.

Literature Review

Two aspects of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) findings (Kuh, 2001) that appear highly salient to teaching the marketing curricula are: (1) active and collaborative learning, and (2) enriching educational experiences. Businesses want to employ people who have the ability to manage rather than merely knowing about management concepts (Cunningham, 1995). As a consequence, business schools should "design a curriculum to assist students" to achieve identifiable outcomes (Wee, Kek and Kelley, 2003, p. 150). These authors believe that problem-based learning (PBL) goes some of the way to achieving the outcomes. They also acknowledge that "The PBL approach is only one way to transform the curriculum ... To produce graduates with the skills required by the business world, marketing educators must first be able to produce self-directed learners" (2003, p.160).

In their study of what constitutes a master teacher, Smart, Kelley and Conant (2003, p.77) concurred with earlier studies that teaching success requires, “strong communication skills, a real-world perspective, caring/empathy, an involvement orientation, and organization/preparation”. Further, participants in the study indicated a number of other attributes they believed were crucial to effective teaching and student learning, e.g. interactive lecturing, considerable questioning to lift student involvement, and assessment pieces “that require critical, integrative thinking” (Smart et al, 2003, p.77).

Peterson (2001) makes an interesting observation: participation is more than ‘taking part’ and class participation may not be the central issue. What may really be relevant is ‘course participation’, i.e. “readily speaking, thinking, reading, role taking, risk taking, and engaging oneself and others, and it may occur inside or outside the classroom confines” (p.187). Peterson (p.188, citing Warren 1997, p.16) states that active learning is “the process of making students the center of their learning” and that active learning hones the skills sought by employers. Drawing upon Talbot (1997), Peterson ponders whether college instructors have themselves been sufficiently skilled in the active learning process to be able to engender it amongst their own students (2001 p.188). Active learning should involve open-ended questions rather than just seeking the ‘right answer’. That is, questions such as “Was there anything in the readings that surprised you?” and “Was there anything with which you disagreed?”, are appropriate.

Providing students with more enriching experiences is another route for marketing educators. They obtain a deeper understanding when an active learning route is adopted where students get to apply concepts in ‘real-world’ tasks (Hamer 2002). He “suggests that experiential learning techniques can be used to increase the definitional knowledge acquired by students of low and moderate overall performances” (Hamer 2002, p.32). This may be a fair description of the School of Business student cohort that is the research subject of this paper. Such students “need to be encouraged to elaborate on course materials outside of the class” (Hamer 2002, p.33).

Focus Group Findings

To date, two focus groups have been held to garner students’ views on a number of issues. The 22 participating students were randomly selected from the School’s database and the groups were generally representative of the major study areas and other categorical factors. The majority of the students were either marketing majors or were taking a high number of marketing subjects in their degrees. The issues covered were, for example: (1) the aspects of university life they are satisfied and dissatisfied with; and (2) their perspective on how engaged they believe they are and what they believe the School should do to lift their engagement.

Students stated that they want to be engaged and that the following factors give rise to an environment that lifts engagement in the classroom setting:

1. smaller lecture sizes (less than 100 students) and smaller tutorial numbers (less than 15 students). The belief is that smaller student numbers will result in the lecturer (and tutors) making the effort to learn their names which in turn aids interaction;

2. a lecture environment that is informal and non-judgemental and which therefore provides students with the opportunity and confidence to ask questions or respond to the lecturer's requests;
3. the lecturer *adds value* to the lecture notes rather than reads from the notes which are normally available for download prior to the class. Adding value can be demonstrated by the lecturer relating the theory from the text to a current market event; and
4. the allocation of time in the lecture to undertake exercises such as a small case study which is then discussed by the entire class.

They also listed a number of uncontrollable factors, as seen from their point of view, which impinge upon their engagement levels. Many students believe inappropriate timetabling hampers their motivation. For example, whilst the lecture period may be on a Monday, their one-hour tutorial may be on a Thursday morning. If this is the only class they have for that day many will make the choice to stay home, go to their part-time job or work on any assignments that are due. Furthermore, the engagement level can also be shaped by the nature of assignments and the nature of the feedback on assignment performance. Students in final year marketing subjects expect assignments to be more practical than theoretical – they want to apply their knowledge and develop skills that they believe they will use in the workforce. With respect to feedback they note the variance between the practices of different lecturers – their preference is for specific feedback on what aspects earn marks and those that cost them marks. Finally, group work has a bearing on engagement levels. A well managed group generally attains a higher grade and students seek to form groups with students they trust to contribute their share, in terms of quantity and quality. Groups that suffer from negative aspects such as poor meeting attendance and language barriers result in one or two members feeling aggrieved at carrying the group. Consequently, whilst they contribute beyond their fair share for that assignment, they appear to carry some resentment towards future group assignments. Not surprisingly, their level of engagement appears to fall in subjects that have group work as a major part of the overall grading.

Structure and Delivery of Marketing Classes

The standard undergraduate marketing class consists of a two-hour lecture plus a one-hour tutorial. In this format the aim of the lecture is to provide information from the prescribed texts whereas the tutorial is used to answer set questions and discuss relevant issues that tend to arise from the lecture. Assignments, be they individual or group, are undertaken outside of these class times. A significant issue with group assignments is the ability of students to arrange suitable meeting times. This is an outcome of the nature of today's student cohort where many students hold at least one part-time job and many students travel considerable distances to attend the campus.

In response to these issues, the author has experimented over the past 12 months with the following class structure for third year marketing subjects in an endeavour to lift student engagement:

1. lectures include significant opportunities for class interaction, e.g. students form groups to discuss a small case or respond to a set task and then present to the class to engender discussion. In effect, a tutorial component is embedded in the lecture; and
2. tutorials are principally allocated to group work (50% of the subject's marks). This provides the lecturer the opportunity to monitor each group's progress on a weekly basis

and respond immediately to their information/clarification requests. Occasionally, an issue from the lecture may be introduced, but generally the focus is providing students with information they need to satisfy the assignment requirements.

Individual assignments in these subjects consist of a reflection paper where students are required to document their baseline knowledge of the subject prior to undertaking the subject, how they had previously learnt marketing and their experiences with group projects in marketing subjects. Added to those elements students highlight what major aspects they have learnt, but more importantly they are asked to reflect on various aspects of the learning environment. For example, does the new class structure engage them more effectively than the standard class structure and does it provide them with the motivation to be more self-directed in their learning?

Feedback from Reflection Papers

The vast majority of students' comments fell into two major categories: (1) the lecture structure; and, (2) group work in tutorials. With respect to describing the lectures a frequently used word was 'interactive' which was then followed by what they saw were the outcomes of this interactivity: (1) it helped their listening and learning, (2) kept them focused, (3) made the lecture more interesting, (4) gave them the opportunity to apply theory and (5) they learnt from a larger cohort of fellow students. It is best summed up by one marketing student when he wrote "the more you involve yourself, the more you will actually get out of the subject". Whilst the move away from a teacher-centric delivery mode is generally welcomed, some students wrote that they initially found the environment 'confronting' – they feared not knowing the answer if asked a question.

The favourable aspects of allocating tutorial time to group work were: (1) students felt compelled to make progress on a regular basis, (2) they obtained an immediate response from the lecturer/tutor on various issues, (3) they felt that they were applying the theory that was covered in lectures and (4) it helped alleviate the difficulties of balancing work-life issues. However, a few students believe that some tutorial time should be allocated to revising major topics covered in lectures as their exposure during the lecture was insufficient for their needs.

Preliminary Model of Student Engagement

The findings from the focus groups are currently being reviewed within the context of an ongoing literature search. They are also being combined with the feedback from student reflection papers to develop a questionnaire that will be administered online. Information from these two sources reveals a number of possible drivers of the level of student engagement. These are depicted in Figure 1 and will significantly shape the development of the proposed online survey.

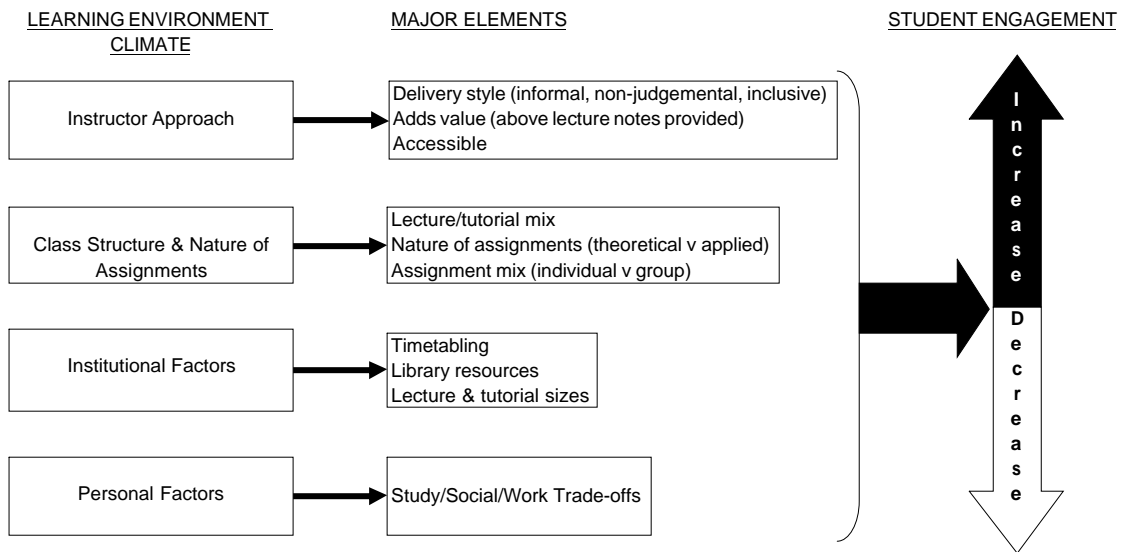


Figure 1: Preliminary Model of Student Engagement

Proposed Analysis

Quantitative research should shed light on the relative importance across the learning environment climate factors and also what elements within each climate factor are significant in determining student engagement. Further, any differences between marketing and non-marketing students should emerge. One possible hypothesis is:

H_0 : There is no difference between marketing and non-marketing students with respect to their level of engagement.

Contribution

The focus groups findings reveal that the instructor's approach, class and assignment structure, institutional factors and personal factors do affect student engagement. These findings, coupled with the feedback provided in students' reflective papers, have led to a model of student engagement which can be tested as part of the quantitative research. The model will be tested not only on marketing students but also on the broader business student cohort, thus shedding light on differences in engagement levels, and drivers thereof, between the two groups. The finding can be taken into account when considering the structure, content and delivery of marketing subjects.

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