

ENGAGING STUDENTS 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. 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 has experimented with various aspects of his marketing classes and combined student feedback with findings from focus groups conducted with business students to derive a preliminary model of student engagement. The model was tested via quantitative research and initial analysis reveals tentative support for directly linking elements in the Lecturer's Approach and Learning Support to the level of student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Four colleagues from various disciplines in the School of Business won a grant from their university to study student engagement at the undergraduate level. The research aims to establish the level of student engagement and identify the drivers of student engagement. Students specialise in fields such as: accounting, applied economics and finance, entrepreneurship, human resource management, marketing and tourism. Approximately 20 percent of students major in marketing and a high percentage of undergraduate business students, majoring in other disciplines, 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 conducted at the start of the research. Next, the paper outlines how the author, in an attempt to improve student engagement, has experimented with the structure of marketing classes, the delivery of material, and the nature of the assessment tasks. The paper then describes how the findings from the focus groups and the marketing class experimentation were brought together to develop a preliminary model of student engagement. This model was explored via an online survey and early statistical results are reported. The

study's limitations are noted, as well as possible future research directions. The paper concludes with implications for the School of Business.

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 having knowledge about management concepts (Cunningham, 1995). As a consequence, business schools should "design a curriculum to assist students" to achieve identifiable outcomes (Wee, Kek, & Kelley, 2003, p.150). Wee et al. 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, Kelley, & Conant, 2003, p.77).

Peterson (2001) made 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) stated 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 pondered 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. Students obtain a deeper understanding when an active learning route is adopted in which they apply concepts in "real-world" tasks (Hamer, 2002). Hamer suggests that "experiential learning techniques can be used to increase the definitional knowledge acquired by students of low and moderate overall performances" (2002, p.32). This student profile 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

Two focus groups were 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. Generally, students had taken at least one marketing subject and over half had taken more. The critical issues raised in the groups were students' perspectives on how engaged they believed they were, what factors drove engagement levels, and what they believed the School could do to improve their engagement.

Students stated that they wanted to be engaged. Generally, students felt that they were engaged and that the following factors engendered an environment that improves engagement in the classroom setting:

- 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.
- A lecture environment that is informal (the lecturer's approach is relaxed) and non-judgemental (not embarrassed if a wrong answer was provided) and which therefore, provides students with the opportunity and confidence to ask questions or respond to the lecturer's requests.

- 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.
- The allocation of time in the lecture to undertake exercises such as a small case study which is then discussed by the entire class.

Students 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 assignment feedback, students noted 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. This "outcomes" orientation is contradictory to Cunningham's proposition (1995) about the qualities businesses require in staff, e.g. the process for deriving a solution is also important. 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 weekly undergraduate marketing class at the author's university 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 text, 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, be they on-campus or off-campus meetings. 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.

At the end of a teaching period, students provide feedback via the university's Student Evaluation of Teaching and Student Evaluation of the Unit surveys. In response, the author has experimented over the past 24 months with the following class structure for advanced marketing subjects in an endeavour to lift student engagement:

- 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 generate discussion. In effect, a tutorial component is embedded in the lecture.
- Tutorials are principally allocated to group assignments (up to 50 percent 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 on providing students with the direction they need to explore and apply the concepts that satisfy the assignment requirements. The lecturer stresses that the analytical processes the students adopt to tackle the assignment are as important as the final report.

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 prior experiences with group projects in marketing and other business 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"

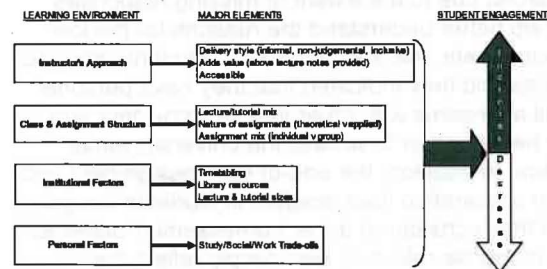
which was then followed by what they saw were the outcomes of this interactivity: (1) it helped their listening and learning, (2) kept them focused, (3) made the lecture more interesting, (4) gave them the opportunity to apply theory, and (5) they learnt from a larger cohort of fellow students. It is 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

Findings from the literature review, focus group output and feedback from student reflection papers were combined to develop a list of issues which were then sorted into the following major Learning Environment categories: the Instructor's Approach, Class Structure and Nature of Assignments, Institutional Factors, and Personal Factors. These categories formed the basis of the Preliminary Model of Student Engagement (Figure 1) and then they evolved into the major sections (with some minor word changes), in the online survey.

FIGURE 1
Preliminary Model OF Student Engagement



ONLINE SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

An online survey was chosen as the best means to encourage student participation. The major sections in the survey were: the Lecturer's Approach (nine items), Class Structure and Assignments (18 items), Learning Support Issues (12 items), Personal Application (two items), Personal Feelings (seven items) and Background Information (14 items). In addition, at the end of each section students had the opportunity to make further comments. The students were also asked to rate their level of engagement during the current teaching period. On enrollment, students are provided with a university email address and the administration system generated around 400 names and contact details. Researchers were aware that approximately 100 or so names were missing but circumstances were such that there was no opportunity to compile a more complete list. Students were emailed requesting them to visit a designated website to complete the survey. Colleagues were asked to promote the survey during classes and posters were attached to School's internal and external walls. Incentives were offered for their participation, i.e., students were entered into a number of prize draws depending upon how rapidly they responded. The survey was available for six weeks. Unfortunately, due to factors outside the researchers' control, these weeks coincided with end-of-term assignments and exam preparation. The aims of the survey were to investigate the suggested relationships indicated in the aforementioned Preliminary Model of Student Engagement. For example, what is the relative importance across the Learning Environment factors, and also what elements within each factor are significant in determining student engagement?

SURVEY FINDINGS

Sixty seven (approximately 17 percent) of students emailed completed the survey. Another 18 students completed the survey but their answers were discarded due to the extent of missing responses. To help better understand the reasons for the low response rate, the author spoke to students from his classes and they indicated that they have personal email addresses with other Internet providers and they never bother to access the university email system. In addition, the end-of-term assignment and exam preparation load resulted in students foregoing what they considered to be 'non-essential' activities. The response rate may also simply reflect the engagement levels of many students.

Nevertheless, the author believes that there are some insights that warrant further investigation to

enhance the School's learning and teach program. The major survey sections had the following rating scales.

TABLE 1
Item Rating Scales

| Survey Sections | Rating Scales |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Engagement | Not engaged (1) to Totally engaged (5) |
| Lecturer's Approach | Not at all important (1), Only slightly important (2), Generally important (3), Definitely important (4) and Extremely important (5) |
| Class Structure and Assignments | Strongly agree (1), Moderately agree (2), Neither agree nor disagree (3) Moderately disagree (4) and Strongly disagree (5) |
| Learning Support | Strongly agree (1), Moderately agree (2), Neither agree nor disagree (3) Moderately disagree (4) and Strongly disagree (5) |
| Personal Feelings | Very poor (1), Poor (2), Average (3), Good (4) and Very good (5) |

The mean rating for the level of engagement was 3.37 with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.935 – the mean score was not statistically significant (at the 05 level) from the author's expectations gleaned from the focus groups. Important elements to the Lecturer's Approach appear to be:

- The lecturer's ability to deliver the material "without just reading from the slides" (mean = 4.60).
 - The lecturer adds value with practical applications (4.33).
 - A non-judgemental environment is created (4.31).
- T-tests revealed these to be statistically significant (at the 05 level). The last two aspects were specifically mentioned in the focus groups.

With respect to Class Structure and Assignments, students agreed that:

- There is an advantage when the lecturer is also the tutor (1.60).
- Group assignments should be a maximum of 40 percent of a subject's total marks (1.76).
- Tutorials should be limited to a maximum of 15 students (1.90).
- Group assignments are not necessary in every subject (2.01).

T-tests revealed these to be statistically significant (at the 05 level). Again, the benefits of small tutorial classes were raised in the focus groups and the angst

caused by group assignments was raised in the focus groups and reflection papers.

When asked to indicate their level of agreement to twelve Learning Support Issues, students agreed that:

- The library should carry more copies of the required texts (1.45).
- The library should have the latest texts (1.49).
- The school needs a person dedicated to providing advice about courses and subjects (1.58).

T-tests revealed these to be statistically significant (at the 05 level). Many focus group participants raised the issue of their frustration with obtaining conflicting and/or wrong advice about their courses from administrators within the School.

Students felt positively about:

- Lecture content (4.09).
- Support obtained from lecturers (3.97).
- How lectures were delivered (3.79).

Again, t-tests revealed these to be statistically significant (at the 05 level). These findings are at odds with comments made during the focus groups where students tended to raise negative aspects of their learning experiences. Perhaps this raises questions as to how representative the respondents are to the overall student cohort – it is not unreasonable to speculate that students who responded would be those that are more engaged and, therefore, have had more positive learning experiences.

LIMITATIONS

At the commencement of the research, assumptions were made by the author (and his research colleagues). For instance, it was expected that the researchers would be able to divide the students into their respective areas of specialisations to discover the varying levels of, and drivers of engagement across academic specialisations. The poor response rate undermines the ability to conduct this more in-depth and rigorous analysis and limits the ability to generalise the findings to the total student cohort.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the lower than expected response rate, a more complete statistical analysis is being undertaken and the author is currently investigating the existence of any statistically significant relationships between the students' level of engagement and the Learning Environment factors and the major elements therein. One-on-one in-depth interviews with students are being considered

to follow-up on issues such as the discrepancy between the favourable rating of lectures in the survey and the negative opinions expressed in the focus groups. In addition, the author will attempt to recruit students who did not participate to establish why, and to determine the extent respondents and non-respondents differ.

The intention is to administer the survey again in 2008. Consequently, there is a need to put in place procedures to capture the relevant student email addresses, administer the survey during a period that is more conducive to completion and perhaps use a more traditional research instrument such as a self-administered questionnaire that can be completed within a classroom setting.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the focus groups and online survey reveal that the Instructor's Approach, Class and Assignment Structure, Learning Support and Personal Factors appear to affect student engagement. Critical aspects are, e.g., how the lecturer delivers the lecture, how the lecturer adds value in lectures, the place and importance attached to group assignments and course advice provided to students. The School of Business now has some informed bases upon which to develop and enhance its learning and teaching initiatives across the various disciplines. In addition, these findings, when coupled with the positive student reflections with respect to the changes the author has made to his marketing classes, can be taken into account when considering the structure, content and delivery of other marketing subjects offered by the School.

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