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Bringing Marketing to Life: Using Experiential Learning Techniques to Teach Undergraduate Business Students

Abstract

For decades, researchers have acclaimed the benefits of the use of experiential learning techniques in university classrooms, and more recently, we see evidence that business schools have attempted to incorporate the same framework in business education. This article introduces the concept of experiential learning and elaborates on a number of research projects that have applied experiential learning techniques in business school settings. Finally, the article concludes with a report on a sample of first year undergraduate business students and their views about how experiential learning has enhanced their experience in a marketing principles course.

Introduction

The things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them. (Aristotle)

Teaching undergraduate business students can be a challenge, particularly because most have relatively little or no applicable business experience. Therefore, how can students tie business theories and abstract concepts to the “real” business world? For decades, researchers have acclaimed the benefits of the use of experiential learning techniques in university classrooms, and more recently, we see evidence that business schools have attempted to incorporate the same framework in business education. Experiential learning is a transitional process by which the experience of the learner is reflected upon. This article introduces the concept of experiential learning and elaborates on a number of research projects that have applied experiential learning techniques in business school settings. Finally, the article concludes with a report on a sample of first year undergraduate business students and their views about how experiential learning has enhanced their experience in a marketing principles course.

Introducing Experiential Learning & Active Learning Techniques

Primarily, it is important to understand experiential learning and how it fits into the general scheme of learning modes. This section provides a discussion of the meaning of experiential and passive/active learning, and an introduction to one of the better known experiential learning models.

Researchers appear to be very much in agreement about the meaning of experiential learning. Alon and Cannon (2000) state that experiential learning is "learning by doing." Similarly, Kolb (1984) describes experiential learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Finally, according to O’Banion (1997), the experiential approach
provides discovery and involvement for students, as they become collaborators in the learning process and assume responsibility for their own decisions. In all instances, the researchers recognize that there is some form of activity involved and the objective of the activity is for students to gain first-hand experience with some concept or theory.

Kolb (1984), one of the earliest researchers in the field of experiential learning, is best known for his concept of the experiential learning cycle. The underlying principle of the model is that the most effective learning incorporates four different learning abilities: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These different types of learning experiences are portrayed in a cycle that has no beginning or end (Petkus, 2000). Petkus further emphasizes how Kolb’s model highlights the importance of the reflection process and how it is the link between the experience and the conceptualization. In this type of learning, the student is actively engaged in the learning process, and it has been typically referred to as an active learning approach. This type of learning differs significantly from the more traditional passive approach most often associated with the lecture format of teaching.

Benjamin (1991) describes passive learning as the learning that occurs while students passively listen to the lecturer and take notes. Conversely, according to Lewis and Williams (1994) active learning encourages students to become involved in applying what they have learned to real life situations. Further exploration of active learning reveals that there are both nonexperiential, as well as experiential techniques. Nonexperiential techniques involve having students reflect upon what they have learned. Experiential techniques, however, may fall into one of two categories: semistructured classroom activities and loosely structured experiential or field activities (Hamer, 2000).

Support for active learning techniques is widespread. Coleman states that experiential activities increase not only student motivation but also long-term retention (Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). Wynd (1989) states that “teaching methods that actively engage students in the learning process enhance student learning and development” (p. 54). Similarly, Gaidis and Andrews (1990) propose that students learn better when they are actively involved with concrete experiences. More recently, interest in experiential learning techniques in business education has grown because it allows the curriculum to be presented in such a manner that students develop "real world" skills. “In this way, students can integrate new skills by practicing new behaviors and receiving feedback” (Alon & Cannon, 2000, p. 350).

**Experiential Learning Practices in Business Education**

A review of the literature reveals that experiential learning is being incorporated within business curriculum around the world and has been achieving positive results. Following are several examples.

**Marketing**

The marketing literature reveals several illustrations of experiential learning. Bobbitt et al., (2000) describe a team-based experiential learning project that integrates three marketing courses: marketing principles, principles of selling, and sales management. According to Bobbitt
et al., the obvious benefit of such an exercise is that it allows students to experience how different courses and their concepts can and need to be integrated. Student reactions to the activity were measured and most students favored the experiential exercise to traditional-instruction-based exercises, such as lectures.

In another instance, Alon and Cannon (2000) reported the results of one university's experience in involving its students in the development of "live cases." The authors reported multiple benefits for students from the project, including acquired knowledge of international marketing, information management skills, Internet skills, and team and communication skills. Gremler et al., (2000) describe several experiential learning activities that are particularly suited to services marketing courses, at both the graduate and undergraduate level. The authors observe that experiential learning allows students to create knowledge as they wrestle collaboratively with the marketing concepts. This may be especially important in an undergraduate marketing class in which concepts can seem simplistic and irrelevant to students if they are allowed to simply skim the surface of the content through the traditional course lecture format. (p. 43)

Finally, Hamer (2000) provides an account of the use of multiple experiential techniques as opposed to a single loosely-structured experiential activity technique combined with a lecture. Findings suggest that multiple techniques result in increased student learning.

**Other Business Disciplines**

Falkenberg et al., (2000) report on a unique project management course, offered to fourth year undergraduate management students, which involves them teaching business modules to elementary students. Feedback revealed that, overall, the experience was beneficial for everyone involved.

Hogan (1992) describes the experiences of a Western Australian university in introducing experiential learning activities in an undergraduate organizational behavior course. Several different kinds of activities were tried and, aside from a few constructive comments, the general conclusion was that these techniques should continue to be the underlying philosophy of the course.

Work by Smith (2002) has assessed the application of Angelo's "teacher's dozen" (Angelo, 1993) to an introductory economics class. Several recommendations emerged; however, some were specifically focused on the inclusion of experiential learning techniques such as group activities and in-class student participation. As well, Ortmann and Coland (1997) believe that hands-on classroom experiments allow students to actually experience economics. Finally, work by Gruca (2000) outlined an Internet-based experiential learning activity that integrated the disciplines of marketing, finance and technology. Experiential learning techniques are unique in that they might offer the only method by which students can truly understand the manner in which business disciplines are integrated.
These examples illustrate the increasing number of attempts by business educators, across a variety of disciplines, to incorporate experiential learning within their courses. In all of the cited cases, the results have been positive and supportive of the need to continue use of such learning frameworks. The research outlined in the following section offers another example of an attempt to incorporate experiential learning into undergraduate business education.

Assessing the Impact of Experiential Learning Exercises in a Marketing Principles Course

The Study

This article is based on a sample of 58 undergraduate students and their views about their marketing principles course and what they considered the most memorable elements of the course. Participants in this study were enrolled in a marketing principles course during the winter term 2001. The majority were business students who completed the course as a core requirement of their degree.

This author has always made an attempt to incorporate experiential learning techniques in all courses, but never made a formal attempt to actually measure its effectiveness. However, through an in-class writing assignment, meant to develop writing skills, the author learned of the success of the experiential techniques. At the end of term in 2001, students were assigned a short, in-class writing exercise, which simply involved answering the following open-ended question: “What was your most memorable class in this marketing principles course?” There was no further instruction. What is unique about the research, compared to the literature already cited, is that student participants were not directly asked to evaluate experiential exercises. They might have equally referred to other components of the course such as lectures, guest speakers, and videos; however, a vast majority made reference to experiential activities.

Analysis & Results

A content analysis was conducted of the students’ papers, utilizing an inductive coding technique to determine categories, which were in this instance the different categories of memorable classes. Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts (Weber, 1990). Through an open coding process, data were broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Once the coding was completed, it was revealed that nine different categories had emerged. A description of each activity/category is outlined below.

Case Study

The use of case studies in the class typically involves the students breaking into groups, reading the assigned case, and then preparing responses to assigned questions. This is followed by an in-class discussion involving all students.
Branding Activity

This activity was presented as a blind cola taste test activity. Student volunteers were asked to identify their preferred brand of cola. They were then asked to taste several colas and try to detect their preferred brand.

Channel Member Conflict Role-Play

Students were divided into three separate groups and were assigned to the role of manufacturer, wholesaler, or retailer. Once in groups, students discussed some of the issues (payment, delivery terms, promotions, etc.) they might have with other members of the channel. This was followed by a mock role-play.

Channel of Distribution Activity

This activity involved the professor playing the role of a “product” manufacturer. A quantity of the product (lollipop or tootsie roll) was brought to class and served as both the product and the means of payment. Various students in the class were then asked to take on the role of wholesaler, retailer, etc. and to then distribute the product to other people in their “market” (seating row) and negotiate terms for payment.

Survey Activity

Students were separated into groups and conducted in-class surveys on a variety of frequently purchased items. Once results were compiled, a discussion then ensued and students quickly identified the weaknesses of their method, including sample selection, sample size, lack of training for researchers, duplication of subjects, etc. This was an effective technique that demonstrated how not to conduct market research.

Letter-Writing Activity

Students were asked to think about a recent purchase and were then instructed to send a letter to the company expressing their praise or criticism. As response letters were received, students brought them to class to share.

Two-way Communication Activity

A student volunteer described a diagram that cannot be seen by the rest of the class. Students were asked to draw the diagram based only on the verbal description provided by the student volunteer. Questions were not permitted. The same activity was repeated, but conversation was permitted. Comparisons were then made between the accuracy of the first and second diagrams. This activity effectively demonstrated the various parts of the communication process and the importance of the feedback loop and selected language.
Activity/Exercise Class

Several students responded that any classes that involved an exercise or activity were the most memorable for them.

Other

This was a catch-all category that included any coded response that did not fit into the other groups.

Results revealed that students overwhelmingly referred to classes that included various experiential learning exercises/activities as being the most memorable of their introductory marketing course. Specifically, 19.2% referred to the branding activity; 17.2% to the channel of distribution activity; 17.2% to the channel conflict activity; 15.5% to the survey activity; 6.9% to the experiential activities in general; 3.4% to the case study; 1.7% to the letter-writing activity; and 1.7% to the two-way communication activity. The remaining 17.2% encompasses those who either misunderstood the question or those who made reference to classes that were memorable for other reasons. See Table 1 (marked as “Finney1.pdf”) for a breakdown of student comments, as coded to determine content categories. In addition, these comments provide insight into some of the reasons why students found certain classes more memorable.

Concluding Remarks

The literature clearly demonstrates examples of successful assimilation of experiential learning across business disciplines. Further, the research at hand provides another example of successful integration within the marketing discipline. When asked the open-ended question, “What has been your most memorable class in this marketing principles course?” more than 80% made reference to some kind of experiential activity. This is significant support for active participative learning.

There are, however, several weaknesses associated with the data collection of this research due to the fact that the data were collected unintentionally without planned methodology. The empirical portion of the study is based on asking 58 students a single question. There are two main issues with this approach: (1) further support is needed to justify whether “a memorable class” is in fact synonymous with effective learning, and (2) the sample size might be considered too small to make any definitive assertions. While we know that all the aforementioned techniques have been successful in terms of being memorable and interesting for the students, future research might investigate the impact of different experiential learning techniques. In addition, a larger sample size incorporating several class sections would improve the generalizability of the results and minimize errors. This topic is relevant to business educators and further insight into the effectiveness of different kinds of classroom activities would be valuable information for teaching purposes.
References


Table 1 - Content Analysis of Marketing Students’ Most Memorable Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Branding Activity</th>
<th>Channel Member Conflict</th>
<th>Channels of Distribution</th>
<th>Survey Activity</th>
<th>Experiential Exercises</th>
<th>Letter Writing Exercise</th>
<th>Two-way Communication</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>I remember this class because I am familiar with company (Washburn Guitar)</td>
<td>This class sticks in my mind because we didn’t just read and talk about something, we were able to take part in it and see it first hand. I find it easier to learn that way because then it’s not just numbers or facts in a book. You learn and remember something because you know where it came from.</td>
<td>This exercise helped me realize some of the many issues among channel members. It seemed to be realistic compared to the thoughts that I would have in my mind.</td>
<td>We learned about the different channels of distribution for consumer and business products. Yes, that day was fun. I left with a smile on my face, some knowledge in my head and my sweet tooth was satisfied.</td>
<td>It was a great exercise and I found it easier to understand how to develop a questionnaire. Actually, anytime you use examples/demonstrations such as this one, it helps to get the idea across much better. It also keeps the class interesting!</td>
<td>The most memorable classes were when we did class activities that involved the whole class. I feel I enjoyed them more because it involved everyone and you learn more when you have to give examples and participate. I think that marketing could be more hands on. I feel I learned a lot more this way.</td>
<td>This exercise was the most memorable because it was interesting to hear about the responses that people received. These types of activities add to the class and make it more enjoyable.</td>
<td>The mid-term exam class was the most memorable because I was not prepared. However, this has been a positive memory because I would hope it will prevent me from making this same mistake of not preparing again!</td>
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<td>&quot;I liked learning about the company (Enterprise) and I now will consider that company as a future potential employer. &quot;</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable because it was interactive and it was something that everyone could relate to. The class was also enjoyable because it was activity while learning.</td>
<td>This exercise helped in understanding how the different channel members profit from each other and how disputes can arise in the levels of distribution.</td>
<td>This class was memorable because we learned about how we had done things the wrong way.</td>
<td>This class involved an informal debate about what they thought the issues would be for members of the channel of distribution was humorous and educational at the same time.</td>
<td>This class was memorable because we involved in an activity.</td>
<td>Classes that involved some sort of activities were the most memorable and educational.</td>
<td>The most memorable class was the first one. I thought it was a 50 minute class and then I realized that it was actually one hour fifteen minutes!</td>
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<td>&quot;This class was the most memorable because it was interactive and it was a good experience to see first hand how people are influenced to buy a product because of the brand name. This exercise really helped me to understand that concept. &quot;</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable class because it allowed for the whole class to participate.</td>
<td>This exercise made the class more interesting; therefore, the class was listening and understanding the information being taught.</td>
<td>This class was memorable because we were involved in an activity.</td>
<td>I liked this class because I found it to be a very interesting exercise.</td>
<td>The times we did practical exercises were interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;This class was the most memorable因为它就是它! &quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;This activity helped me understand the brand better and the context of the information. &quot;</td>
<td>I think I remember this class the best because it brought what I had learned in the textbook to real life.</td>
<td>This class was memorable because it was easier to learn and remember the material.</td>
<td>This class was memorable because it introduced us to market research.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The first day was the most memorable and my most memorable class was the first day because I realized that the course wasn’t going to be what I was expecting. I was expecting that it was going to be a boring course, but happily it didn’t turn out that way.</td>
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<td>&quot;Activities like this are the best representation of a topic to help us learn. Sometimes activities like this help people remember more because they were involved. &quot;</td>
<td>This class was memorable because our group was able to identify most of the relevant issues that came up in the debate.</td>
<td>It made the whole process easier to understand because we were getting involved.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable. It taught us how to properly conduct a survey, by first showing us how not to.</td>
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<td>The class when I had to do an oral presentation was the most memorable.</td>
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<td>&quot;This class sticks in my head because everyone got involved. I found it to be a fun and knowledgeable class. I find I understand more when we discuss things as a group. &quot;</td>
<td>This class sticks in my head because the whole class got involved and everyone had an opinion.</td>
<td>It was a good class because not only did we learn how each channel member worked, we also had fun.</td>
<td>This exercise really made its point and the topic was easier to understand.</td>
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<td>&quot;Class always seemed interesting. There’s not really one class that sticks out. &quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;This class helped me realize the power of branding. &quot;</td>
<td>This class was attention-getting.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
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<td>Misunderstood question - spoke about most memorable course.</td>
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<td>&quot;It was interesting to learn about the power of branding. &quot;</td>
<td>This class was very interesting.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
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<td>Student misunderstood question.</td>
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<td>&quot;This exercise taught that we buy products often because of the brand name. &quot;</td>
<td>It was very interesting and at the same time fun.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
<td>This class was the most memorable.</td>
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<td>Misunderstood question - spoke about most memorable course.</td>
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<td>&quot;This class helped me learn that the way a company promotes its brand it as important as the product itself. &quot;</td>
<td>This class sticks in my head very well.</td>
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