

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 14, 1987

USING A JOINT PROJECT INVOLVING MBA MARKETING MANAGEMENT AND UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING RESEARCH STUDENTS TO TEACH MARKETING RESEARCH

Leigh Lawton, College of St. Thomas

ABSTRACT

The author describes an experiential method for teaching marketing research. Undergraduate marketing research students act as small "marketing research departments" for MBA teams. The MBA teams are responsible for writing marketing plans for small business clients. The information needs of the MBA teams result in projects which expose the marketing undergrads to all phases of marketing research. While students perceive the workload to be heavy, many rise to the challenge and enjoy facing real-world problems and contributing to the decisions of operating enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an experiential method for teaching marketing research through the use of a joint project involving two separate courses--undergraduate marketing research and MBA marketing management. The MBA marketing management students are required to produce a marketing plan for a small business client, while the undergraduate research students act as the marketing researchers for the MBAs. While this paper mentions some of the consequences of the project for the MBA students, it is primarily a discussion of the joint project as a method for teaching undergraduate marketing research.

This paper will describe how the joint project operates; will discuss the benefits of making the project a focal point for the course; and will describe the problems encountered in using this approach, as well as its implications for the role of the instructor.

The school at which this project is used is a large, private midwestern college. The typical MBA student at the school is 29 years old with six years work experience. All MBA classes meet evenings and weekends because almost all of the MBAs are employed full-time. The undergraduate students at the college are typical full-time, day students, many of whom hold part-time jobs.

OPERATION OF THE PROJECT

Small businesses seeking help from the College are screened by a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) located on campus. Businesses passing the SBDC's screen--hereafter referred to as Small Business Institute (SBI) clients--are selected and forwarded to the instructor in a particular functional area (i.e., marketing, management, or finance) according to the primary need of the client. (The project described in this paper, is concerned with clients needing marketing help). To provide an overview of the chronological order of events involving the project, Figure 1 shows the timetable of activities for a typical semester.

Once the instructor of the MBA marketing management course receives the list of potential clients from the SBDC, he selects the SBI clients to be used in his class. The primary criteria for selection by the MBA instructor is that the business must have an existing product, and a need for a marketing plan (as opposed to a desire for some specific marketing research). In the marketing management course,

the MBA instructor lays out the course requirements, explains that the course will revolve around designing a marketing plan for a small business client, and presents the frame- work for the marketing plan in the first couple of class meetings. Then based on interest in the clients, each MBA student selects a case from among the choices offered by the instructor. This selection process divides the class into teams of three students per client. After a short briefing by the MBA instructor on its client, each MBA team meets with the client to get a first-hand description of the business and problems faced. The MBA team must then submit to the MBA instructor a written statement of the goals of the client and a preliminary statement of work to be done for the client. To help ensure that the teams do not promise more than they can deliver, each MBA team must focus on a single product market (e.g. selling accounting software to retailers, or selling mail delivery service to industrial customers). While the MBA students are engaged in these activities, the under-graduate marketing research class is being exposed through lecture, discussion and classroom exercises to the material they will need in order to undertake their research project. Material on problem definition, exploratory research, secondary data sources, and writing a research design is covered before the research students ever meet the MBA teams.

After each MBA team has met with its clients and has ascertained whether or not a research team would be useful for its case, the marketing research class is given a brief description of the available clients and their problems. The teams of research students (usually three) are formed and each team chooses the case it wants.

At this point, each research team meets with its respective MBA marketing management team. At this first meeting, names, telephone numbers, etc. are exchanged, and the MBA team members brief the research students on their client's background and discuss the research needed.

The research teams must then conduct preliminary secondary research and write a research design.¹

¹ The initial meeting with the MBA team and the presentation of the research design are the only pre-scheduled meetings between the undergrad and MBA students, until the research team presents its final report. Both the undergrads and the MBAs are advised to maintain close contact (and most meet several times) to help ensure that the research stays on track.

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FIGURE 1
TYPICAL SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES FOR THE JOINT PROJECT

<u>TIMETABLE</u> Before semester begins	<u>ACTIVITIES OF MARKETING RESEARCH STUDENTS</u>	<u>ACTIVITIES OF MARKETING RESEARCH INSTRUCTOR</u>	<u>ACTIVITIES OF MBA MARKETING MANAGEMENT STUDENTS</u>	<u>ACTIVITIES OF MBA (INSTRUCTOR)</u>
3 1/2 Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Read and discuss material presented by instructor. . Form teams and choose SBI clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Present material on problem definition, exploratory research, secondary data sources, and writing a research design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Read and discuss material on elements of a marketing plan. . Form teams and choose SBI client. . Write up SBI client background and preliminary statement of work to be done for client. . Write-up information needs analysis (listing of information needed for marketing plan). . Write-up research plan, include statement on who will collect each item of information on needs analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Review list of potential SBI clients . Interview and select clients . Present material on writing a marketing plan. . Present brief description of available clients. . Approve information needs analysis. . Approve research plan.
FIRST MEETING BETWEEN MARKETING RESEARCH AND MBA TEAMS (Discuss background and goals of SBI client and research needs of MBA teams)				
1 1/2 Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Preliminary secondary research and write-up of research design. . Read and discuss material on questionnaire design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Approve research design. . Present material on questionnaire design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Conduct research that is not to be collected by research teams. . Oversee work of research team. 	
PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH DESIGN TO MBA TEAMS (Modify research design as needed and approve design)				
1 - 1 1/2 Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Complete secondary research. . Design questionnaire. . Select sample. . Read and discuss material presented by instructor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Approve questionnaire. . Present material on fielding a survey, editing, and coding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Approve questionnaire. 	
1 - 1 1/2 Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Conduct telephone interviews. . Read and discuss material on tabulating and writing a report. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Present material on tabulating data and writing a final report. 		
1 Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Write-up final report. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Approve final report. 		
PRESENTATION OF FINAL REPORT TO MBA TEAMS				
1 Week			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Develop marketing plan. . Orally present marketing plan to MBA class and instructor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Suggest improvements and modifications to the plan.
1 Week			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Collect any additional information needed for modifying. . Write-up marketing plan and deliver to client and instructor. 	
1/2 Week			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Meet with client to answer any questions on plan. 	

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Once the research design has been approved by the undergraduate instructor the research team presents the design to the MBA students. Both the undergrad and MBA teams are advised to devote considerable attention to the contents of the research design. It acts as a written contract stating what the research team promises to accomplish.

Once a research design has been approved by the MBA team, the research team must do what is necessary to implement the design. Implementation usually includes some additional secondary data gathering followed by survey research. Due to time constraints, the survey research almost always involves telephone interviews with a relatively limited sample--usually 40 to 100 respondents. Before fielding the study, the research team must get its questionnaire approved by the undergrad instructor and the MBA team.

As the students proceed with the project, lectures and exercises on questionnaire design, collecting primary data, editing and coding, etc. are given in the order needed for the project. Topics which are not relevant to the project (such as observation and experimental design) are delayed until later in the semester-- after completion of the project.

Once the data has been collected, the research team must tabulate the results and write the final report. Tabulations are either done by hand or with the aid of CRISP, a relatively user-friendly micro-based statistical package. Because the MBA team needs the results early enough in the semester to incorporate them into its marketing plan, data analysis is not a strength of this project. Relatively little analysis is done beyond simple tabulations. (A "non-live" data analysis case is given after completion of the SBI project to give adequate coverage of this material).

Once the report has been written, it goes to the undergrad instructor for approval. It is checked for completeness, accuracy and readability. Some revisions and rewriting are almost always required before the final report goes to the MBA team.

BENEFITS OF THE MBA-UNDERGRAD JOINT PROJECT

This cooperative approach to teaching marketing research and MBA marketing management offers several benefits.

For the undergraduate marketing students this project incorporates the motivating aspects associated with a "real life" situation (as opposed to a classroom exercise). Students recognize that, in addition to their grades, the hopes and dreams of a small business person are at stake. While instructor prodding is sometimes necessary, it is quite rare for a group to go through the project without at least one student rising to the challenge. Fear of letting down the client often carries greater motivational weight than the prospect of a poor grade.

The project also brings a heightened sense of relevance to the course material. Students realize that they will be required to use the material presented in class in the very near future. The course material on secondary research, in particular, tends to be far less abstract when the student knows that he or she will be gathering information in a matter of days.

The project exposes students to all facets of marketing research. It is especially good at involving students in the early phases of problem definition and translating the

marketing problem into a researchable project. In many cases the MBA students request more information, and desire broader, less-focused information than the research students can possibly provide. Thus the research teams are forced to help define and shape the scope of the project. Of course, arriving at a mutually agreeable research project is not always accomplished without conflicts arising between the research team and the MBA team. However, while these conflicts may be discomforting, they certainly provide exposure to the "real-world."

A side benefit of the project for the typical undergraduate is that it brings the student into a fairly close working relationship with MBA students. As mentioned previously, virtually all of the MBA students are employed full time. Thus, the project provides a work setting that exposes the undergraduates to the type of people they will be working with upon graduation.

The benefits of the joint project also extend to the MBA marketing management teams. Most obviously it magnifies the ability of the MBA teams to gather data. Since almost all of the MBA students work full-time, collecting the information necessary to make decisions based on hard data would be a real problem without the marketing research class. "Subcontracting" the more formal research to the undergrads frees the MBAs to be involved with more qualitative data gathering.

In addition, the joint project forces the MBA students to act as managers. Clarifying and specifying what information is needed, delegating and directing the work of the undergrads, and ultimately evaluating the information they receive, are all tasks the MBA students must perform. The marketing research teams permit the MBAs to focus more on strategic issues and less on data gathering.

The benefit to the client is a marketing plan based on research and analysis involving the efforts of an undergraduate team, and MBA team and two faculty members.

PROBLEMS

While the joint project offers many potential benefits, it is not without drawbacks. Probably the greatest problem arises from the hassles created by the sheer number of people involved. From the marketing research team's point-of-view, their bosses consist of the three members of the MBA team, (who may not always agree among themselves), plus their instructor. In addition, at times, the MBA instructor and even the SBI client may directly intervene. Things do not always run smoothly with so many people to please. Sometimes the research team and the MBA team disagree over what, and/or how much research, is to be done. Generally, the two teams will work out a compromise on their own, but often not to the satisfaction of both parties. The undergrads are sometimes intimidated by the MBAs and feel that they are treated with little respect. As noted previously, however, while these conflicts may pose problems, they are a part of the real-world that is usually abstracted out of artificial cases.

Because so many people are engaged in the joint project, good communication among all concerned is difficult to achieve. With research teams comprised of day students, many of whom work part-time, and MBA teams who are evening students working days,

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finding meeting times when all can attend (or even just making phone contact with other team members) can be a trying task.

Other problems for the marketing research teams include: limited contact with the client--most information they receive is filtered through the MBA team; the time crunch of completing a project within a span of approximately six weeks; and the usual problems (e.g., conflicting personalities) which are encountered whenever students work in groups.

The joint project also presents problems for the MBA marketing management team. They must rely on the research done by the undergrad teams for input to their marketing plans. If the research is poorly done, their plans are likely to suffer. This coupled with the fact that the marketing research instructor grades the undergrads--albeit with feedback on their performance from the MBA teams--sometimes results in the MBA team feeling that they are at the mercy of the research team. Especially in the early going the MBA's tend to feel anxiety over whether or not inexperienced undergrads, even with guidance from an instructor, are capable of producing worthwhile results. In most cases, as the project moves along, if communication lines are open between the groups, this anxiety diminishes.

Yet another problem with the project is that, due to the necessity of completing the research in time to incorporate the results into the marketing plan, analysis of the data is generally quite limited. Given the nature of the project--usually something fairly straightforward such as determination of demographics of the target customer--this deficiency is generally not fatal to the research effort.

THE ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

Organizing the class around the project alters the role of the instructor. While material must be presented, the instructor's freedom to cover topics is somewhat constrained by the need to cover tools that will be used in the research. Class time is given to group work and is, therefore, lost for other possible uses. The instructor's role also changes from teacher to resource person/consultant.

SUMMARY

While the joint project poses several disadvantages for conducting a marketing research course--chiefly the hassle of working with multiple groups, and the pressure to produce a useful product for the client--it offers benefits that more than outweigh the problems. The motivational aspects of a "live project" coupled with the opportunity for the research students to get actively involved in the early stages of the project and work through the entire research process are powerful advantages for this method of teaching the course.