

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

A RATIONAL CASE FOR SYNTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS A PRIME INGREDIENT IN THE MARKETING CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

Marketing educators face the dilemma of having to both guide their students in the study of marketing and prepare them to do something upon graduation. Since the requirements of learning and application change over time, and since the domain of marketing is particularly affected by revolutions in technology, law, economics, etc., academics need to regularly rethink and clarify the ends and means of the marketing discipline. This process hinges upon systematically determining the skills that an education in general, and a marketing curriculum in particular, should develop and then defining the most effective route to that end. This paper addresses mechanisms for accomplishing the task of marketing education that emphasize the role of synthetic marketing experience.

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Professors of business know the tension between student's desire for marketable skills, administration's desire for meeting or upholding accreditation requirements, and demands of prospective employers. This places a heavy burden on the curriculum planning effort. Which skills should be emphasized? What balance between conceptual abilities and technical proficiency should be sought? Which subjects should be added? Which eliminated? What mechanisms can best accomplish this? The questions go on.

These questions suggest that the role and position of the business curriculum requires regular reevaluation and, often, adjustment. This truism is nowhere more applicable than in the arena of marketing education; a discipline fraught with multifaceted and rapid change. This paper examines the position of several relevant publics on the issue "What should an undergraduate education in general, and a bachelor's degree program in marketing in particular, deliver?" and addresses mechanisms for accomplishing each of the task. Specific emphasis is placed on the strategic role that simulations and other synthetic experiences in marketing can play.

BACKGROUND

Ambiguity in the role of marketing as an academic discipline is not surprising. Students are constantly reminded that the marketplace is dynamic and those that serve it must vigilantly watch for signals of change and make ready and thoughtful course adjustments. The problem of shifting

demand for the discipline is not one of recent origin. Actually, it is a logical consequence of academic trends, the vocational interests of students, and, most importantly, the employment requirements of industry.

Each of these stakeholders deserve some input into the definition of an appropriate marketing curriculum. In addressing the question of orientation, several studies have investigated the views of various external groups concerning what they feel should be included in a marketing education. Hancock and Bell (1970) examined the views of faculty, students, graduates, administrators, and employees. Coyle (1975) and Hise (1975) concentrated on the views of marketing graduates, while Dyer and Shimp (1975) focused on the attitudes of marketing chairmen and executives. Hugstad and Barath (1980) examined the views of deans, personnel managers, and college placement directors, and Bellenger and Bernhardt (1977) surveyed practitioners.

A number of studies (Loudenback 1972, Edge and Greenwood 1974, Wheelen et al. 1974, Gifford and Maggard 1975, Coyle 1975, Futrell 1976) have explored business attitudes toward marketing education, implying that business sources are a relevant factor in developing the curriculum. Laric and Tucker (1982) have developed a model for achieving a "highly responsive posture in marketing," based on Kotler's (1975) treatment of the "highly responsive organization," which emphasizes input from business.

McDaniel and Hise (1984) agree that solicitation and careful evaluation of feedback from critical elements of the business community are invaluable in being truly responsive to needs of the marketplace. They define these critical elements as being chief executive officers of major industrial corporations. Schleede and Lepisto (1984) concur that periodic review and evaluation of marketplace needs and competitive analysis need to be conducted, and Abell (1977) and Keane (1977) suggest that a marketing curriculum must certainly be externally oriented. The reason for this, the predominant view holds, is that the major objective of a marketing curriculum is to prepare students to be successful in a managerial level role (Done 1979, Blackwell 1981, Rudolf 1981. Laric and Tucker 1982).

In addition, several bodies associated with higher education have studied the purposes of an undergraduate education and have offered taxonomic checklists for enhancing the probability that an "educated person" will be the product of the process. Each category of perspective that has been mentioned will be briefly examined, in order, from the general to the more specific.

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

MAJOR PERSPECTIVES MACROEDUCATIONAL VIEWS

A number of organizations associated with higher education have undertaken the task of identifying common denominators of Success in undergraduate studies in order to help shape a favorable environment favorable for learning. The results of these efforts focus on principles of good instructional practice.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1977) suggests that although the curriculum should not be the same for all students in undergraduate degree programs, the basic outcomes of a curriculum should be (in part) the ability:

- to analyze written and spoken ideas
- to use computational tools properly
- to integrate information gathered from more than one source
- to produce new conclusions
- to test the validity of conclusions
- to use knowledge to solve problems

These abilities represent a variety of cognitive and technical skills that are popularly viewed as existing in rather low levels in marketing curricula.

The report to the academic community on "Integrity in the College Curriculum" by the Association of American Colleges (1985) insists that a minimum required curriculum in any subject treat:

- inquiry, abstract logical thinking, and critical analysis
- literacy: writing, reading, speaking, and listening
- understanding numerical data
- values

And a report cosponsored by the American Association for Higher Education and the Education Commission of the States (Chickering and Gamson 1987), argues that good practice in Undergraduate education:

- encourages contacts between students and faculty
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
- uses active learning techniques
- gives prompt feedback
- emphasizes time on task
- communicates high expectation
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning

What each of these lists has in common is a recommendation that a high degree of realism be built into the learning process. At the moment, the marketplace environment is characterized by highly complex organizations, utilizing highly complex systems and technology, and operating in very fast moving environments. No longer is the world just rapid or just complex... it is, to borrow a term from Harrison Owen (1987), "Raplex." If raplexity is the reality of the marketing environment, then only realistic, high involvement, hands-on-like training will offer any real hope of preparing marketing students for the world they will soon enter.

The Academic Component

A current trend in academia is to draw lines between the disciplines that are predominated by technical skills versus cognitive reasoning. In attempting to categorize the typical business school offerings, programs such as office management, data processing, accounting, and even finance tend toward an emphasis on specialized knowledge or skills where generalized standards exist in industry. Adherence to "generally accepted accounting principles," procedure manuals, calculation of financial ratios, and flow charting seem to qualify as technical skills that can be easily observed and tested.

On the other hand, programs of study that focus on decision-making approaches, human relations, and negotiatory skills (i.e., marketing and management) are so problem-solving oriented that, to some, they appear to qualify as only philosophies of business. Since philosophy is much more difficult to "get a handle on" and to incorporate in meaningful ways into ones personal scheme for thinking of business practice, its value is unclear to many. For some it may seem more a system of promises than a guide for action.

Also, the question of "What are we suppose to be teaching?" plagues academicians. Some writers have implied that "general marketing skills" do not exist Independently, but that they represent a mix, in varying proportions, of the major skills in production, finance, etc. (Henry, 1971). Also, Levy remarks that business "...marketing thinkers have trouble with finding their consistent locus...because their subject matter radiates so readily into and across other disciplines...(1976)."

In addition, one wonders whether the offerings in business tend to represent a systematic blend of courses essential to the process of successful business, or if they instead depict the range of academic curiosity generally possessed by its professors. This might explain the evolution of the nondescript blending of curriculum we often encounter in review of business school catalogs. Indeed, Is marketing lacking a cohesive core subject matter? Just what is its position?

The Student Component

Not only does the problem involve marketing instructors, but also students of the discipline. With the deletion in some case of a "general business" curriculum, marketing has often rotated to the front to serve as a "catch-all" course of study. Students who wish to avoid a more rigorous system of study may opt for marketing, since, as everyone (allegedly) knows, it is just a formalized approach to common sense anyhow.

The business discipline may be attractive to non-quantitatively oriented students who prefer to take the "slick" route to a business degree. These students tend to be of the "arm chair philosopher" variety who prefer to let their minds wander aimlessly through the maze of marketing complexities, while resorting to quick and easy answers without hesitation. These also tend to be ones who can never seem to understand the reason for their dismal showing on exams that call for

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

logic, application, and sound thinking; characteristics of supreme value for the marketing manager.

Serious students may hesitate to select marketing as a major when it seems to lack the clear direction and objectives, other programs appear to offer. Particularly in a time of job shortages, marketing may lack the job placement attractiveness that skill-related majors provide their adherents.

The Industry Component

With all the publics that a discipline serves, its main customer group is that of future employers. The university may be viewed as a component of an input-processing-output system. The notion of people, in this case students, as products has been treated in the literature at least as early as 1972 (Kotler) and more recently (Hirschman 1987) in a quite novel context. It seems clear that, in general, employers who hire job candidates with a major in marketing, want them to possess a knowledge of the vocabulary and concepts of marketing, problem-solving skills, strong oral and written communication abilities, an appreciation of all the functional areas of business, computer literacy, and a sensitivity to ethics. That is to say that they wish to buy a product made to specifications. As graduates in marketing from a particular institution tend to accept employment in a select range of jobs, it would be helpful to identify these job types and, to the degree possible, address relevant skills in the curriculum.

Students, supplies, books, etc. represent the input of raw materials, the act of “educating” serves to process these, thereby creating form utility, while the finished product is a graduate with marketable skills. Indeed the ultimate test of the value of a “product” is its demand by consumers and its worth in the marketplace.

As the “ultimate” consumer of education, employer’s needs should be carefully studied and requirements served by the educational process. Since those requirements appear to be running toward the analytical abilities and problem-solving skills demanded of decision-makers, the marketing discipline must seek ways to be responsive.

An Exploratory Survey

In order to fix the perceived position of marketing, one research effort (Timmerman and Lewis 1984) surveyed business students, business faculty, and business professionals concerning the level of cognitive and technical skills developed by the an undergraduate marketing education. Cognitive skills were defined as:

“Those skills which exemplify the mental processes of problem solving using perception, reasoning, intuition, and knowledge.”

Technical skills were defined as:

“The ability to perform specialized mechanical skills in a detailed, rule-oriented manner.”

The results permitted the plotting of the discipline’s position on a two-dimensional perceptual map juxtaposed with the other standard business disciplines. One of the most interesting findings was that business professors, students, and practitioners held very similar views of the skill content of the marketing discipline. The agreement of these groups was that the marketing discipline is relatively low in cognitive and technical skill content. The results may have some bearing on the direction we need to look for a marketing curriculum of the future. The question remains: what level of cognitive and technical skills should the marketing curriculum attempt to impart to its student population?

Other questions include: “What should be the role of the marketing curriculum in teaching specific skills?” “At this stage in the continuing education of the individual, should skills be emphasized or theoretical knowledge?” “Should skill development be left to the business world?” However, assuming that a set of “general marketing skills” exist which correspond roughly to those presented earlier in this section, the more relevant question becomes, “What is/are the most efficient mechanism(s) for developing these skills?”

SYNTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Synthetic experience, a notion popularized by Maxwell Maltz (1960), as a body of activities, offers the most promising mechanism for imbuing the student of marketing with the array of skills for success. To qualify as a synthetic experience, an activity must simply be one that offers an encounter with realism in an artificial (i.e., devised or contrived) environment. These experiences include, but are not limited to: case analysis, simulation (with or without integrated spreadsheet analysis capabilities), “live” projects, data set for manipulation, role playing, routing and scheduling problems, end-of-chapter exercises, writing mock research proposals, debated, negotiating, learning centers, team projects, peer critiques, internships, cooperative job programs, computer assisted instruction, etc.

While any discipline can benefit from the application of some of these techniques, marketing represents a discipline for which synthetic learning experiences are a natural. Marketing consists of human related and social skills, which are more difficult to place in a traditional textbook environment. Many of the courses lend themselves uniquely to an application of synthesized learning. For example, the Principles of Marketing course is an excellent setting for introducing students to the interaction of various controllable and uncontrollable variables in the marketplace by means of an elementary simulation. Via simulation, they will gain an understanding of the complex nature of the marketing environment, an appreciation of the linkage between marketing variables, and develop dexterity with basic business tools.

Courses in Selling and/or Sales Management can benefit extensively from opportunities for role playing or acting out an actual sales interview. They also represent a prime opportunity to run

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

routing and scheduling programs to effectively manage a sales territory (these can also be modified for application to transportation problems). Marketing Research can benefit from case analysis, statistical manipulation of simulated data, and projects that have them put the research process all together and culminating in a research report and presentation. If this project can be made living by helping out a Small Business Development Center client, so much the better.

Naturally the Marketing Management course, which seeks to integrate all the students comprehension of business and marketing knowledge and tests for the ability to apply basic business and marketing skills, can be a prime beneficiary of synthetic learning experiences. Beyond these obvious examples, any occasion for giving students a taste of decision making, use of the computer, application of analytical tools, experience with report writing and presentation, and an encounter with group dynamics and negotiation, all afford experiences closely resembling those in the workplace that can ease the transition and serve to develop functional, productive skills.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM PLANNING

Professors hold the main responsibility for shaping an environment which will improve undergraduate education. In marketing, activities that can be contrived or synthesized which:

- (1) encourage frequent student-teacher contact in and out of classes and contact with the business community
- (2) develops the ability to work as a team, sharing and responding to others' reactions
- (3) gives students prompt assessment of performance
- (4) highlights the value of effective communication
- (5) applies time pressure to performance

will serve as an aid to higher student involvement, will sharpen thinking and deepen understanding, will introduce students to the realities of the marketplace, will encourage learning mastery, will challenge, and will open an avenue of understanding unachievable through traditional classroom experience.

Ideally every core course in the marketing curriculum would require a variety of synthetic learning experiences since this form of learning is so suitable to the marketing discipline. Of course this requires cooperation among university leaders in an environment that stresses the qualities of shared purpose, moral support, adequate funding, policies and procedures consistent with the purpose of synthetic experience, and a continuing examination of how well, these purposes are being achieved.

Apathetic students, functionally illiterate graduates, incompetent teaching—so rolls the drumfire of criticism of higher education in general, but no less for business education and marketing education specifically. Some states have been quick to hold out carrots of encouragement. But there are not enough carrots to improve marketing education without employing innovative or neglected methods. One of the most neglected methods involves the use of synthetic

experience and one of the greatest potential beneficiaries of this method can be the marketing discipline.

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Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 16, 1989

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