

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 15, 1988

ACTION EXAMS IN THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR CLASS

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ABSTRACT

A class in Consumer Behavior or Buying Behavior should be more than a lecture-based presentation of research into the decision making process if one of the goals of the class is to produce more informed consumers. One way to accomplish that goal is to involve the student in experiential decision making processes as part of the class requirements. This paper presents one method of using out-of-class or action exams and assignments in the Consumer Behavior class.

STUDENT PREPARATION

A class that features innovative approaches quickly gains a word-of-mouth reputation on most campuses. In order to gain this reputation, the instructor must prepare a no-nonsense syllabus that outlines expectations! issues, and course objectives clearly and then meets them. Another requirement is that the textbook used in the course be flexible enough, thorough enough, and easy enough to read to give the student the necessary fundamentals with which to evaluate the experiential process. This means the book must be very strong pedagogically. I have found that *Consumer Behavior*, 5th edition (Dryden Press) by Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard provides a sound foundation and a logical pedagogy for student application. Other texts may be equally suitable.

After a series of trials and errors, I have found that a series of three assignments to begin the class are very beneficial. I then use a multiple choice exam followed by an action mid-term and a take-home final exam. All the exams, except the multiple choice, are essay. In the remainder of this paper, I will outline the assignments, the mid-term, and the final exam and discuss how they are evaluated.

THREE INITIAL ASSIGNMENTS

On the first day of class, the students are given a syllabus with the first three assignments. These assignments are stated to the students as follows:

Assignment One

You are to buy some product- -any product is fine but it is preferred that the product is one you would normally buy or one for which you happen to determine a need on that particular day.

You are to type a detailed report about this purchase. The report is to include everything you can think of pertaining to this purchase, e.g. why did you buy it. where did you hear about it, has anyone in your family ever bought this product before, etc. Your grade will be based on the completeness of your report.

Assignment Two

You are not to attend class today (the second scheduled meeting of the class). Instead, you are to visit any retail store you wish. You are to choose some person (must be a

stranger) shopping in that store and observe that person from the time they enter the parking lot (or store) until they leave the store. Be sure the subject is not aware you are observing him/her.

You are to type a detailed report about everything you observed about the subject's shopping. Include only those things you can observe. But be sure to include everything you can observe. Your grade will depend on how thorough you are and how observant you are.

Assignment Three

You are to draw a flow-chart model of consumer behavior based on your experiences and your conclusions about the decision process you participated in and observed in Assignments one and two. You are to look in the text or any other consumer behavior text until after you have completed this assignment. A flow chart model is usually composed of boxes, circles, and arrows that denote direction or flow of the process. An example will be given in class for those who do not understand the form of a flow chart.

Your grade will depend on how well you integrate the information you found in the first two assignments and how creative you are in connecting the principles we will talk about in class in our discussion of those two assignments.

Evaluation

The students come back to class on the third scheduled meeting with Assignments one and two. Students are called on at random to read their papers. The instructor comments on each paper, pointing out the principles to be found in the student's work. There is great opportunity for a seminar-type atmosphere here where considerable laughter and serious discussion of points can occur. Grading is based on how well the student's followed the instructions. One major shortcoming that usually occurs is a lack of self-description, e.g., demographic, physical description, and psychographic information, on Assignment 1. Similar problems are typically found with Assignment 2, as well. Students are also embarrassed to be following a total stranger around and their observations are somewhat incomplete, e.g., they almost always fail to get the car license plate number. Grading on these papers is completely subjective and the total of all three papers is about 1/10 of the total possible points for the term.

Assignment three produces an assortment of models- most of which are similar to the model found in the text used. It is a moot question whether the model is that accurate or whether the students sneak a peek at the text or whether they have asked someone who had the class before. The point of the assignment is to have the students become aware that the decision process does not occur in a vacuum. The internal motivations are always affected by the external environmental variables. I have each student draw their model on the chalkboard and explain it. At appropriate points, I show the similarities between the models and bring out some basic principles about the process. This allows a good introduction to the various sections of the class schedule.

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Action Mid-term--Protocols

The mid-term or protocol exam begins on the first day of class with the assignment of partners. Wherever possible, I assign a female and a male to a team because it provides a very nice opportunity to discuss the differences in the buying process because of demographic variables. I produce a list of 8 items that each team is to purchase- - four of the items by the female (or first person assigned to the team) and four for the male. The instructions for the exam are as follows:

You are to go shopping with your partner. You are to buy the four items on your list and nothing else. As you are shopping, you are to speak into a tape recorder. What you are to say is everything you can think of about that purchase. You are to talk about every product comparison you make, why you are buying that particular brand, how much it costs, the ads you saw for it- -in short, everything you can think of about the purchase. When you have finished with your purchases, you are to change roles with your partner. They will now make the purchases on their list while you record their verbalized thoughts about the purchases.

Each of you takes the tape of the other's purchasing trip. Your exam must include a typed transcript of this tape. Based on this transcript, you are to explain, in terms of the principles presented in the text, how your partner made his or her decision and which, if any, decision rules they used. Further, you must explain why you believe a particular decision rule was used, e.g. you must define the decision rule and relate examples from the transcript that support your contention about the rule that was used.

Your grade on this exam will depend on how well you understand and are able to explain the decision process for these low involvement purchasing decision situations.

Evaluation

This exam focuses on low involvement products and compensatory/ non-compensatory decision processes, including the use of decision rules, e.g., lexicographic, conjunctive, etc., as explained in the text. A typical list of products might include the following: a snack food, a beverage, a shampoo, an accessory (a hair bow, a handkerchief, etc.), something that must be mixed together before it is consumed, some item of sports equipment, a fruit, a toothpaste. Any set of low-involvement products will work. I try to always include some product that cannot be purchased in a food store so that the opportunity to address store choice will arise.

Evaluation is based on how well the student justifies his or her choice of the decision rule or compensatory process for each purchase. The grading is, of course, totally subjective but can be made more objective in many cases by severe application of the principles governing the decision rules. Thorough reading of each transcript and notation about the process is the recommended approach.

Final Exam

The take home final forces the student to apply the principles learned in the entire course to a purchase they have made. The instructions are simple. The student is to:

Recall the most expensive or most complex purchase you ever made. It can be anything, e.g., your choice of a college, your car, an engagement ring, an interview suit, a harp, as long as you were the primary decision maker in the process. It can be an item purchased by your parents as long as you made the decision of which item to purchase. What you are to do is to write a report on how you made the decision to

purchase this product. You are to use the model in the text book as the outline of your report. You are to tell me what caused product recognition, where and how you became aware of alternatives to solve the problem, what influenced your search process, etc. Even though you may not have used the model to make the purchase, I want you to tell me how the model could describe your decision.

You will be graded on how well you demonstrate an understanding of the model and its linkages. Your own highly involving purchase situation is to be used as the example of the rational decision process suggested by the model.

Evaluation

This exam is designed to evaluate the student's grasp of the differences between the high and low involvement decision situation. The model used in the text provides a convenient mechanism to allow this comparison and the use of the student's own highly involving purchase decision makes the exam more personal. Applying a highly rational model to what may have been less organized in actuality, should make the student a better consumer, as should each of the action assignments and discussions that surround them.

Summary

Action exams in a Consumer Behavior or other class can serve to make the principles and theory taught in the classroom much more personal and much more relevant. The incorporation of experiences as part of the assignments and examinations serves to make the class more exciting. The excitement and increased personal relevance tend to be retained and to make the students better consumers because each principle and each theory has had personal experiential application.