

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MARKETING:
STUDENT CONSULTANTS**

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As college students learn about the functions of business in various courses, they often concentrate on the text. The theoretical perspectives tend to stay in the theory realm without any method of evaluating the application of the skills learned in the course. This lack of understanding can even occur in undergraduate research oriented courses if practical experiences are not afforded to the students. The research methodology may be applied to cases supplied by authors of the textbooks, but the students are still not demonstrating their knowledge of the entire research process.

Consequently, students at Western Illinois University have been exposed to a different teaching style in the study of research methodology. This approach has also been used in courses other than the marketing research course. The four experiential exercises described below indicate the application of a research oriented experiential approach in undergraduate research, retailing, consumer behavior and advertising courses.

EXPERIENCE #1: QUINCY, ILLINOIS

During the 1974-1975, marketing research class, the class members were instructed that a detailed study of the consumer shopping patterns of persons living in Quincy, Illinois would be conducted. This study would focus on several important consumer shopping attributes such as outshopping, the area within Quincy normally shopped, the particular stores shopped, the reasons for shopping at these stores, the informational sources used and the major decision maker. Each of these variables would be specified for eighteen different product categories such as men's dress clothing, women's casual clothing, small electrical appliances and dining out.

The class members assisted in defining the nature of the problem, collecting and studying secondary data about the Quincy market, constructing and pretesting the questionnaire and selecting the sample. Since the quarter was only ten weeks in length, the study was not completed that winter term. Therefore, the spring retailing class was instructed on the proper interviewing techniques and how to select the households to be surveyed. The retailing students interviewed 544 households during a two week period.

Since the collection of data and placement onto cards during that term, different research classes have studied

Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978

the Quincy data. The fall, 1977, class developed an empirical term paper using the Quincy data. They, in effect, wrote an undergraduate thesis. The class members were assigned to groups of three for this project. Using two working papers written by Thistlethwaite (2) (5), the groups examined the questionnaire to determine which consumer behavior variables (both shopping pattern variables and demographics) would be of most interest to them. Next, each group applied the entire research process in its approach. A problem was first defined. Available secondary sources on the chosen consumer behavior problem were reviewed so that appropriate hypotheses would be formulated for investigation and testing. Secondary data concerning Quincy were also reviewed so that a feel for the general nature of the market would be obtained.

In writing their paper, the group members had to analyze the questionnaire that had been employed and suggest changes in its construction for future use. Since the data was already available, the students were spared the process of dathering the data through house to house interviews. If this interviewing process had been necessary, the students would not have been able to complete the study. The data could not have been verified, culled and placed onto computer cards (344 variables for 544 respondents) so that data analysis could be performed.

The students were able to analyze the data after learning how to operate interactive terminals and use a canned statistical package in data analysis. In order to be able to learn these two new aspects of data processing within the research course, the students used a Guide developed by Thistlethwaite and Rauch (4). The experiences of using the Guide have been detailed at two MICC conferences (1) (3).

Now, the students could support or refute their hypotheses by running various statistical tests. By incorporating a data analysis approach in the research course, the students were able to conduct a research project (using an established questionnaire) and prepare a written, comprehensive research report. The total research process was studied and applied in this manner.

EXPERIENCE #2: MCDONOUGH COUNTY SKILLS SURVEY

The fall, 1977, research class was also given the assignment of assisting in the conducting of a marketing survey to determine the occupational skills of persons living in McDonough County, Illinois. In order to prepare for this task, the instructor had already performed some preliminary steps of the research process.

During the summer, 1977, the Chamber of Commerce of Macomb had requested that an inventory of occupational skills

Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978

possessed by persons in the county be made. A proposal was developed and submitted to Chamber committees for their approval and sponsorship. The Chamber did agree to pay for postage (a mail survey was deemed desirable) and printing of the questionnaires.

The students were informed about these activities so that they would be cognizant of them as they proceeded in their participation. The students now became active consultants in the study by restating the problem, surveying sources of information about direct mail questionnaires and occupational sources. They then developed a preliminary copy of the questionnaire. A synthesized questionnaire was developed by the instructor and was given to the students for evaluation and refinement. The students also developed introductory letters which would be sent to potential respondents one week in advance of the questionnaire and with the questionnaire. They also assisted in the sampling plan. Since the class was also working on the Quincy term projects, their participation in the project ended.

The winter research class became involved since they assisted in the evaluation of the questionnaire, the selection of the sample and the mailing out of the letters and questionnaires. The winter class is also conducting a study of their own choosing to be completed during the term. Consequently, they also experienced two projects: one which was a community service project for the instructor and one which was tailored to their own particular interests and needs.

EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCES #1 and #2

By utilizing the approaches described, the students are able to study the research process through a research text and their own experiences. These experiences include the conducting of the students' own research projects, the learning of interactive processing and efficient statistical analysis and performing community surveying.

The students have felt that they have learned much about the research process. Typically, the students indicate that they had no idea that the research process had so many variables and perspectives. The major problem with the fall, 1977, study was the necessity for changing due dates and revision of the syllabus due to a prison site selection process occurring at that time.

The students definitely learned from the experiences. For some it was not a truly pleasant experience since they did not keep up with the assignments and found it difficult to catch up once behind. Many students were not familiar with

Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978

an application approach in their courses and had to learn how to apply concepts as well as learn them for tests. The instructor learned that more time must be spent on explaining why and how in addition to what. Learning objectives are being developed to accomplish this.

EXPERIENCE #3: CONTINUING EDUCATION

This experience concerns the integration of the work involved in marketing courses by lower and upper division students in two different courses during the same quarter. The lower level student were members of a marketing research class. The upper level students were in an advanced course - a consumer behavior course. Thus, the lectures, reading and experiential base in the upper level course became the basis for a management activity. These students directed and coordinated a project which the lower level students would participate in. The project, therefore, allowed the two different groups to role play functions as they would be practiced in their business careers.

The research problem was one of determining who the market was for Continuing Education opportunities offered by Western Illinois University in the western region of Illinois. The people in Continuing Education wanted to know more about their market in order to more effectively segment the market in terms of product/service offerings. They were eager to have to descriptive survey research project done for them "in-house."

A 10 percent sample of the estimated population of the area with a radius of about 60 miles from the campus would be drawn. The sample of 3000 would receive a mailed questionnaire. Another 300 respondents would be interviewed by telephone. Finally, 30 respondents would be personally interviewed in depth. The marketing research students were to design, test and administer the mail and telephone questionnaires. The consumer behavior students would design, test and administer the personal interview questionnaire.

The managers (consumer behavior students) were also responsible for meeting with the client (Continuing Education persons), defining the research problem, determining the kinds of data needed, learning data analysis techniques and, if time permitted, writing a research report and presenting it to the client. The field persons (marketing research students) were learning about research methodology and applying it to the study.

The project was a sequential learning experience for the older students and a practical one; one that they might

Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises, Volume 5, 1978

be experiencing in the real world after graduation. For the lower level students, the classroom perspective was made real as they 1. had to work for other students during this research procedure and 2. applied concepts throughout the quarter.

EXPERIENCE #4: MEDIA STUDY

The fourth experiential situation was one offered very soon after fall quarter, 1976, began. The opportunity to integrate classroom experience and field experience in two advertising courses would be afforded. The field experience concerned ~ campaign by the Macomb Retail Merchants Association. Its members wanted to learn more about media exposure by students on the campus. A special community promotion had been planned and one of the media reps suggested that this promotion, a special shopper, be distributed in the dorms. The shopper was to contain special items and coupons not offered through other media. Thus, the merchants would have the opportunity to use an auxiliary form of advertising and to gather much wanted data and exposure patterns.

Two classes in the promotion concepts course and one class of an advanced advertising theory and planning were used. The advanced students became managers and defined the research problem and determined the sample for the descriptive survey research study to follow the shopper campaign. The managers also explained the project to the field persons (students in the promotion concepts course), trained them on the shopper handout procedures, spot checked distribution points, prepared a telephone survey and also interviewed some town merchants after the shopper distribution.

The field persons submitted questions that the managers refined for the survey instruments. Each of the students was responsible for the distribution of 50 shopper advertisements at randomly determined points on the campus. Each person receiving a shopper was asked to give his/her name and sequence number to provide a list of names to be contacted the following week. Approximately 5,000 shoppers were distributed to students.

The field workers quickly learned the truth about advertising practices of retail merchants as well as human behavior. They also had to learn to work for a research manager during the project. Finally, these students were integrating their experiential learning from the project into the classroom learning. The managers applied advertising and research concepts to a practical setting. Combining this knowledge with the managerial experience they received provided them with a realistic perspective of what they could expect in their careers.

EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCE #3 and #4

These projects differed from the first two since a managerial perspective was provided as an experiential exercise. The students are, thus, able to coordinate marketing skills with much needed managerial skills and perspectives

For the instructor, experience #3 provided the opportunity to be involved in research so that insights and experience could be related to future classes of research. The students seemed to enjoy the experience and to readily recognize the added value such an opportunity afforded them. The students' interest in all phases of the lecture and readings seemed to be increased. As a byproduct, the students learned to know each other on a personal basis so that ideas about careers and job interviewing could be shared.

The students participating in experience #4 seemed to enjoy this project the most of all of those used by the instructor. For the instructor it provided a fine liaison between the merchant community and the classroom and demonstrated to the merchants, the quality of student output that could be given. The students' major complaint concerned the lack of time to process the data and learn about the results. A few students did continue with the study through independent study the next quarter.

SUMMARY

The four experiences described in this paper indicate a variety of ways that marketing students and faculty can become involved with the community. This involvement provides a new dimension to teaching and learning for faculty, students and the involved community. Using classes in research, retailing, consumer behavior and advertising to conduct various types of studies should be encouraged. Coordination between some of these classes will enhance the achievement of higher order learning objectives of synthesis and evaluation. The students who take these courses are also differentiating themselves and providing information for the recruiting process. When recruiters ask the students to respond to typical questions such as "What problem have you solved while in college?" or "What practical experience do you have that helps to train you for this position?", the students will be able to respond quickly and at length to these questions. The experiential exercises have helped to make the students "business consultants."

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