

TRIUMPHS AND TRIALS OF USING PROBLEM BASED LEARNING IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

The key engine that drives the new marketing landscape or the E-economy is KNOWLEDGE. The demand for knowledge may have intensified, but the suppliers of knowledge – the education institutions - are still struggling to meet such demand.

The challenge is not just about supplying content and technical knowledge, it is about how to produce a new breed of employees who can create and manage knowledge in the dynamic E-economy. And it is amidst such dynamics, that the Diploma of Marketing in Temasek Business School adopted a problem-based learning (PBL) model when it restructured its Marketing Communications Section's academic architecture.

This paper looks at the trials and triumphs of adopting PBL from the educators' and students' perspectives. The paper concludes with implications and issues for marketing communications educators in using PBL. The finding also supports the proposed fundamental shift to adopt PBL as a philosophy rather than an instructional tool.

KEYWORDS

Marketing education
Marketing Communications
Problem-based learning
Student-oriented learning
Knowledge economy
Learning philosophy
Learning tool

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Introduction

Final year marketing students undertaking the specialized track in marketing communications (Marketing Communications) at Temasek Business School, Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore, worked in a client based environment for which there were real external clients. The students formed mini agencies offering integrated marketing communications services and worked on the challenges presented by the clients. From the students' perspectives, this was truly a real problem based curriculum that focused on real working problems. This paper shares how problem based learning curriculum (PBL) was implemented and highlights the issues and implications in implementing PBL that marketing communications educators need to address when incorporating this approach to teaching and learning. The findings support the proposed fundamental shift in the marketing communications curriculum to adopt PBL as a philosophy rather than a tool.

About Problem Based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) is heralded as an innovative and effective way to promote student-centred learning in today's academic architecture. It serves as a powerful tool in empowering students to take charge of their learning and draws on their diverse backgrounds, prior knowledge, networks and real-time information. What this means is that with PBL, students move toward meaning-making over fact-collecting (Rhem, 1998).

There are many reasons promoting the adoption of PBL. One of the key attractiveness of PBL is that it allows students to take charge of their learning decisions instead of mere data collecting. Students learn through contextual problems and challenges that model after the real work place. In addition, they learn to work in groups and achieve higher levels of cognitive development, independent investigation and creative problem solving. This approach to teaching and learning brings prior knowledge to action more rapidly and promotes learning that adjusts to any situations just as quickly.

There are many definitions of PBL, but the official description generally describes it as "an instructional strategy in which students confront contextualized, ill-structured problems and strive to find meaningful solutions." (Rhem, 1998)

Institutional Background

The Diploma in Marketing (DM) was launched in 1995. A three-year full-time course, it equips fresh GCE "O" level school leavers (high school leavers) for the world of work in professional marketing. It receives an intake of about 140 students annually.

In the first year, the DM students are grouped with the other first year students from the Temasek Business School, namely, the Diploma in Business and the Diploma in Logistics and Operation Management to form a common category labelled Diploma in BUS/LOM/MKT. All students in this common category study general business subjects for their foundation year. In the second year, these common categorized students progress to their respective professional areas. It is at this time that DM students read marketing foundation subjects. In the third and final year, DM students choose to specialise in either Marketing Communications or Retail Marketing. During their final year, they are also required to complete a 12-week industry work attachment. Figure 1 shows the progression of DM students from year 1 to year 3.

Figure 1
DM CURRICULUM: 1995-2000

Year	Semester	Subjects	Hours
1	1	• Principles of Management	60
		• Microeconomics	60
		• Computer Fundamentals	60
		• Business Communication Skills 1	45
		• Introduction to Business Statistics	60
		• Business Accounting 1	60
	2	• Marcoeconomics	56
		• Business Computing & Applications	56
		• Business Communication Skills 2	42
		• Statistics for Management	56
		• Principles of Marketing	56
		• Business Accounting 2	56
2	1	• Business Finance	60
		• Business Law	60
		• Business Information Systems	60
		• Buyer Behaviour	60
		• Applied Marketing Research	60
		• Productivity & Service Quality	48
	2	• Business Communication Skills 3 & 4	52
		• International Finance	56
		• Management Accounting	56
		• Principles of Marketing Communication	56
		• Retail Management	56
		• Organisational Behaviour	56

3	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Business 52 • Practice of Entrepreneurship 52 • Business Ethics 39 • Service & Industrial Marketing 52 • Student Internship program 12 weeks Marketing Communications Option <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising Management 52 • Strategic Creative & Visual Communication 52 Or Retail Marketing Option <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail Internship 1 52 • Retail Visual Merchandising 52
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Marketing Management 48 • International Marketing 48 • Selling & Sales Management 48 • Direct Marketing & Sales Promotion 48 Marketing Communications Option <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Relations 48 • Integrated Marketing Communications Projec 48 Or Retail Marketing Option <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail Internship 2 48 • Merchandise Buying 48
Total		1,934

The traditional method of learning was teacher-oriented whereby the lecturers assumed the key role as content-providers. In a week, a student would attend 4-hour class per subject namely: 2-hour lecture and 2-hour tutorial. On the average, they handled six subjects per semester. Each semester consists of an average of 15 weeks of instruction. Lecturers focused on content delivery during lectures and would assess the students' understanding based on what was delivered in the lectures and tutorials.

Students were assessed based on the semestral examination and the coursework comprising of continuous assessment throughout the semester. The semestral examination was a 2-hour formal written examination. The coursework normally comprised of evaluation on class participation, a mid-term test and a group project. The group project entailed them to apply what was gathered in the lectures and apply them in their project. The teaching philosophy focused mainly on knowledge, comprehension and application levels of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. This approach to teaching and learning required students to bring what was learned in the classes and apply them to the problems at hand, resulting in a passive problem-solving mindset.

In keeping with the new economic landscape and its demands for knowledge workers, the Marketing Division strives to innovate its teaching and learning methodologies. It is with this force that the Marketing Communications Section decided to explore the PBL approach.

The Marketing Communications PBL Structure

In October 1999, all Marketing Communications staff attended a five-half-day PBL workshop led by facilitators from the Temasek Polytechnic PBL Centre. The topics covered an introduction to PBL, designing problem statements, facilitation and assessment. The purpose of the workshop was to equip the staff with the understanding and working mechanism of PBL. The three Marketing Communications subjects to adopt PBL were those in semester two; Public Relations, Direct Marketing and Sales Promotions, and Integrated Marketing Communications. An orientation lecture on PBL was conducted for all students during the first lecture of the semester to prepare them for the new delivery mode.

The Marketing Communications PBL framework presented students with an ill-structured problem at the onset of the semester, provided by clients. Students were given a PBL kit that comprised the syllabus, lesson plan, assessment structure, problem statement, learning contract, peer evaluation form and learning issues.

The Marketing Communications PBL approach was a client task-centred activity that required student-to-student interaction in small groups. In this manner, interdependence, sharing and co-operation were fostered. Students learnt to be accountable to their group and learning goals when servicing their respective clients or accounts.

Marketing Communications PBL Roles and Procedures

In preparing for the client-based problem learning environment, the faculty firstly had to prospect for external industry clients to serve as accounts for the student-Marketing Communications agencies.

Students formed their own student agency or group. In the group, they assumed different roles such as the Account Manager, Strategic Planning Manager, Media Executive, Creative Director and so forth. Social interaction was maximised as they planned their strategies and shared their findings. The PBL process comprised of four phases. The first phase required them to identify and clarify the problem statement to find out what they already knew and what they need to know and do. This was carried out in the initial client briefing provided by the clients. Subsequently, they learnt to map their own strategies to accomplish the work on hand. Students became self-directed learners working within the constraints of resources and time. The second phase dealt with assignment of tasks, roles and feedback. The third phase focused on research, discovery and analysis: acquiring new information, reasoning and fitting them to the problem. The fourth phase was on crisis management as students changed their strategies when they faced unanticipated barriers or new information thrown in by the clients.

Lecturers assumed the roles of facilitators or managers of the learning process. They facilitated the small group discussions and communicated at the students' level. As a result, this interaction fostered continuous feedback, acceptance and bonding.

As the Marketing Communications students were not academically qualified and motivated as expected, enabling sessions were introduced to help them transit to this new mode of learning. These enabling sessions or mini-lectures comprised 30% of the traditional lecture hours and were conducted in the first few weeks of the semester. Core contents were highlighted to provide a skeletal platform for the students to work on.

Such teaching marriage of PBL and traditional method approach meant that the students would learn to acquire new knowledge and understand the theoretical aspects concurrently. The students would then be well equipped – via the PBL mindset while the enabling sessions served to get them started on the critical professional and technical skills, attitude, and broad based thinking.

During the tutorials or facilitation sessions as they are known in PBL terms, students presented their weekly meetings by sharing their strategies on handling problems, formulating learning objectives, assigning tasks, fact finding, reporting and managing clients all at the same time. Collaborative learning was promoted as the other groups were allowed to ask questions. Students re-worked based on these feedbacks. Eventually, they presented the final solution to the clients. Both the faculty and clients graded the students' works. All students were also required to submit their individual learning journal that captured their reflections on their learning process. At the end of the semester, each student agency group submitted a written report; each individual in the group completed a peer evaluation, submitted their individual learning journal and sat for the semestral examination.

Marketing Communications PBL Outcomes: A Win-Win Experience - Triumphs and Trials

This section highlights the feedback on PBL gathered from the students throughout the semester based on regular meetings and end-of-semester sharing among academic staff, pre and post surveys on students' opinions of the PBL approach, role of facilitators, facilities and management meetings with students.

The feedback provided a glimpse into the PBL process from the perspectives of students and educators. It highlights the wins and difficulties encountered by students and educators in this PBL journey. This serves as valuable inputs for Marketing Communications educators when implementing PBL approach.

Trials

“I only want to know what will appear in the examination. My main worry is to pass the subject.”

According to Brown et al (1997), “assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. Students take their cue from what is assessed rather than what lecturers assert as important. Put rather starkly, if you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment”.

This statement holds true for the Marketing Communications students because the traditional examination format and style to assess were maintained despite the change in delivery. This sent mixed signal to the students. The benefits of PBL were undermined since students were more interested in studying for their final examinations and ensuring that they pass the subject. It also did not help where there were little relationship between the PBL sessions and the type of questions that were set in the examination system. The examination system remained to assess content acquisition while PBL work focused on process skills and knowledge creation.

“Don’t spend so much time and sleep on this. There is no mark for this part of the project. Project deadline is still far away.”

“This” refers to the various stages advocated in the PBL process. Students tend to be interested in finding the one correct answer or solution to the problem at hand. They wanted to get to the ‘bottom’ of it without pondering on the issues surrounding the problems, identifying unclear terms and issues, problem identification and so forth. In short, they were uncomfortable with unclear terms and ambiguity.

Even though the facilitators provided a student PBL learning kit and guided the students along, students did not reflect this informal feedback into their work. This could be due to the fact that these students were not assessed progressively but a final grade was awarded at the end of the project or at the final presentation of the project. Assessment was discrete and discriminatory.

“It’s all my group’s fault. I am unlucky to have academically slower team-mates.”

Students were encouraged to form their own groups of approximately five students each. The groups’ membership generally remained constant throughout the semester. Like-minded students tend to attract each other. Hence, the more academically-abled and motivated students moved fast to form their own group. These groups of students were reported to enjoy the PBL mode of learning better. They were quick to define the learning issues. Members carried out their tasks as planned and with high quality. The groups were able to do more in view of fast and motivated learners. As a result, their projects are relatively better.

The other groups, on the other hand, were unsure and lost. They constantly sought assurance from facilitators, as they were unsure if they had covered the relevant scope. They had to manage their group dynamics in addition to the project on hand since their members had diverse needs, motivation and orientation. Hence, they frequently dealt with group conflicts. This group of students tends to have more problems coping academically and managing groups dynamics. They preferred the traditional method of learning where they were told what to do, what to study and where to go from here.

“I am confused and lost. How do I know that I am looking at the right material?”

PBL starts with a client’s brief. Students had to identify the problem statement before they could proceed to answer them. In the traditional system, lecturers asked these questions. Students struggled with uncertainty and ambiguity as they tried to craft their own problem statements. They kept asking for assurances on whether they were heading in the right direction. They discounted what their group members said and preferred to rely on their lecturers, whom they still looked up to as content-provider and endorser of knowledge.

Triumphs

“I feel good when I see my ideas being implemented.” (Student)

“The students’ ideas are really refreshing. My actual ad agency did not see the situation like the student agency did.” (Client)

The PBL approach was undeniably a ‘win-win’ for all parties involved. The students benefited from working on a real problem with a real client. The challenges were not just simulated, but the students were working on real industry data and constraints. There is no doubt that this approach prepares the students for the world of work by developing their knowledge and attitudes. These students are immediately employable where time, efforts and costs in training them when they enter the Marketing Communications and related industries are shortened.

For the students, they were really challenged and in finally producing a piece of product that is endorsed and ‘inspected’ by the clients, students became more confident and motivated. Their self-esteem increased and developed though they faced uncertainty and difficulties in the beginning phase of the PBL approach. The sense of ‘realness’ in the teaching approach helped to increase and finally maintain the motivation level of many students. The quality of their output was also evident as they approached the project with an enquiring mind. Their reports reflected the balance of their technical skills and thinking skills. One of two groups who submitted for the 2000 International Advertising Association InterAd Competition (Visa) won one of the top three places in the Regional Category.

From the educator’s perspective, the approach is also a win as it provided an alternative approach to teaching a professional discipline such as Marketing Communications. Educators get to stay in touch with the latest industry trends and interact closely with industry partners and clients. They are able to provide their students with the necessary Marketing Communications skills and knowledge comparable to professional standard works. Finally, students are more motivated and interested in their studies. Educators enjoyed the way students learnt actively and independently.

Issues and Implications

Staff Development in PBL

For PBL to succeed, its success lies in the facilitation (delivery) and course development. Hence, a sound program of staff development in these aspects is important and mandatory. As argued earlier, PBL puts the students first. By putting learning, rather than teaching at the center-stage enables students to learn their subject areas well, gain higher level of competencies, adopt transferable skills, and life long skills as demanded by this new dynamic e-economy.

As students learn their new roles in education, the roles of the academic staff have changed too. Staff will inevitably spent more time in PBL delivery than the traditional method. Most of faculty's times were spent on facilitation and consultation. The demands and difficulties of staff have now changed from a lecturer to that of a facilitator. Under PBL, staff's main concern was in the complexities and uncertainties involved as a PBL facilitator. In facilitating real problems, staff felt that industry experience is very crucial in giving timely and relevant advice. Most staff cannot divorce themselves from the traditional roles that were connected with their pedagogical stance. The pedagogical stance stems from the way in which staffs in higher institutions of learning see themselves as teachers or experts first. It is difficult to not see themselves as failures when a student fails.

Besides the change in the role from being a content provider to a facilitator, staff felt that the challenge also lies in working in teams spanning across subjects and disciplines in constructing well-thought problems with definite learning objectives. The initial development of PBL materials was time consuming. The regular meeting among staff to share their experiences increases the interaction and learning among staff, a contrast to the traditional system where staff works individually.

The implication here is that the staff must be re-skilled or re-trained for PBL. They need to migrate from the traditional environment where they had invested so much. A model where the lecturer is just a facilitator or a learning manager/ consultant and process is king will replace the traditional method where lecturer and subject content are the kings. The question we ask among ourselves is "Is there a common PBL competency required of a staff?" We do not have the answers but we are aware that it takes a lot of displacement for the staff as it means taking 'power' away from them. Yet, facilitation skill is critical to the success of PBL. Staff must be re-skilled in the PBL way of developing a course, delivery and assessment methods for the PBL approach to be successful.

Summative Assessment

In PBL, if an examination is deem critical by the faculty or for the purpose of industry accreditation, the examination should set criteria that reward understanding and not mere Triumphs and Trials in PBL

reproduction of content. This summative assessment is commonly used in the traditional teaching approach, where the students' works are graded. In the past, this is the only time where students cram to study and have their grades reflected on their results script. At least a major percentage of the grade reflected is derived from this summative assessment.

We are proposing that in PBL where process is important and key in a student's learning, we also foresee that the world still expects a form of affirmative mark that the student (product) has made the mark. In addition, we suspect that in PBL an individual student may 'hide' behind a group and not made full use of the student-centered learning approach.

What we are proposing is that the weightage assigned to the examination and the type of process and content questions must correspond respectively to the time spent in learning skills and the type of learning that has taken place in the PBL mode. The proposed examination format should tap the high order of Bloom's taxonomy for analysis, synthesis and evaluation, critical skills that are relevant in a PBL environment. Open book examinations with thinking questions are recommended.

Progressive or Formative Assessment

To ensure that students learn throughout the semester, continuous assessment or formative assessment that examines students' learning as they progress throughout the semester is recommended. This is non-graded. This serves as feedback to students on how they have progressed and performed at critical interim periods. These periods serve as useful checkpoints or markers/ milestones for students and lecturers.

The traditional method required the students to submit their projects at the end of the semester. Lecturers graded and returned the reports at the close of the semester. In the new PBL model, the report is split into many phases, critically similar to the process of a marketing communications campaign. Phase 1 is the advertising strategy checkpoint; phase 2 is the creative strategy checkpoint; phase 3 is the media strategy checkpoint; phase 4 is the client pitch checkpoint, and phase 5 is the last phase where the students submit their final report and pitch to clients.

Under the various phases or checkpoints, students would be able to re-work on their project based on feedback and discussion points by a panel of lecturers. This allows for a closer simulation of the real working environment where re-works are accepted.

Academic Hard Structure (Infrastructure)

In PBL where the students face real world problems, the course and delivery method should be designed to mirror real working world. As much attention is spent on the academic structure, we

are also faced with administrative issues, which we realized must be tackled too. The classroom setting and time allocation or timetable for staff and students must also be looked into.

We propose that the classroom setting, and staff and student timetables should mirror those of the corporate marketing world. The classroom should be one set up like an office with clusters of office workspace and e-enabled to the web world. The timetable for both staff and students should look like a corporate executive's organizer and their time clocked like appointments in a diary.

Staff Performance Appraisal

Student assessment issues are recognized as important in ensuring that the assessment methods employed are compatible and relevant with a PBL approach to teaching and learning. We also like to note that assessment of staff in the form of performance appraisal should also be looked into. The performance appraisal structure should also fit the PBL philosophy. We acknowledge that this area is a sacred cow and buried under the big academic bureaucratic and administrative machine. However, to ensure that PBL works smoothly, a staff's performance must also be measured appropriately, one that is relevant to the PBL teaching and learning approach.

Conclusion

The Marketing Communications Section embarked on its pioneer journey to adopt PBL in a bid to produce "flexible" students that are future-proof and able to cope in a world of rapid obsolescence. PBL is heralded as an appropriate strategy to produce competent professionals and independent life-long learners. However, the potentials of PBL can only be reaped if it is implemented correctly.

PBL saw the unmeasured benefits that it can bring. Hence, as part of the continued search for excellence in teaching and learning, the Marketing Communications Section would like to advocate that PBL be adopted as an education philosophy that supports the entire marketing curriculum starting from year one. Future work includes exploring a fundamental shift from a teacher-centred marketing curriculum to a new academic architecture that promotes student-centered learning using PBL as a philosophy, not just an instructional delivery tool. Taking the cue from the dynamic business world, holistic and integration approach drives the curriculum. Subjects would be deconstructed and assembled into learning problems. Learning problems are categorised into learning domains/themes. The whole learning mechanism is student-centred to achieve the maximum benefits of PBL.

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