

CHALLENGING FIRST YEAR MARKETING STUDENTS USING A TOURNAMENT STYLE COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

Active student engagement during the learning process is an integral part of student training (Buckner and Williams 1995; Hickman 1994), having now been linked to both student retention and learning outcomes. Many students however are failing to sufficiently engage with their studies, as they as they face more complex life patterns and a range of work-related and personal priorities (McInnis 2001). This is of concern for researchers, educators and policy makers who are now seeking new ways to increase the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities (Cleary and Skaines 2005).

The higher education literature emphasizes four key characteristics of engaging pedagogy: 1) collaborative learning, 2) increased staff-student interaction, 3) authentic, and 4) academically challenging. First, when students have the opportunity to actively construct and assimilate knowledge themselves through a reciprocal process with their peers, they can become more involved, resulting in increased academic effort and a deeper, more personally relevant form of learning (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 2000; Bruffee 1995; Schon 1995). This is reinforced when staff and students actively work together to co-produce what is learned (Paswan and Young 2002; Smart, Kelley and Conant 2003). Third, the integration of authentic, or 'real world', activities into the higher education curriculum also increases motivation, productivity and the quality of student work (Fall 1998). Finally, learning environments that challenge and support students can encourage active learning, as well as intellectual and psychological development (Chickering and Reisser 1993). The use of competition-based assessment has been adopted in engineering courses with reported success (see, for example, Cheok et al. 2003; Mickle and Lovell 2001; O'Shea 2006), but the role of competition in marketing education has received little attention. We propose this as a means to challenge students. Combined, these characteristics foster the involvement, commitment and sense of belonging necessary for students to engage with their studies.

We have developed a teaching innovation designed to promote student engagement in a first-year, principles of marketing course, which is taught across three University campuses. Now entering its fourth offering, the 'Get Marketer Challenge' is a challenging, authentic assessment task that links students to their peers and educators. Student teams are required to solve real-world marketing problems that are specified and sponsored by industry partners. They complete two challenges for two different companies in a Semester, each representing 15% of a student's grade. While the use of group projects and work-integrated learning activities is common in marketing courses, what is novel about this assessment task is that students participate as part of a course-wide competition.

In the first tutorial class, students are allocated into teams of four or five (random allocation assists commencing students to know their peers). The teams are required to develop an innovative solution to a specified problem based on consumer insights and market research. They then pitch their solution to their tutorial group in a five-minute oral presentation. This represents the first round of the competition. The best team from each tutorial class is determined by student vote. Students nominate their top three preferences using a voting card, which is submitted to teaching staff (students are asked not to vote for their own team). The team from each tutorial receiving the most student first preference and overall votes is then invited to deliver their presentation in lectures the following week. In effect, a total of 250 teams are reduced to 40 for this second round of the competition. Students vote once again. Winning teams (n=6) are invited to present to the company sponsoring the challenge in the final round. The overall winning team, as determined by company representatives, receives a cash prize (this has ranged from \$AUD200 to \$AUD1000) and all students reaching the final round receive a certificate to acknowledge their success in reaching the final.

Evaluation surveys have shown that around 50% of students believe the Get Marketer Challenges helped their progress on course goals, with many commenting that the competition with incentives motivated them. In one semester, the class average for the two challenges was 71%, as compared to an overall mean of 60% for the individual essay assessment item, and 56% for the final exam. These results are consistent with Stutts and West (2005), who report that students feel they learn more in competitive project-based classes. Teaching staff and industry sponsors have also commented on the high quality of student work and their own increased involvement as a result of the competition structure. The role of competition in creating valuable learning experiences warrants further study.

References Available on Request.