

Practical marketing insights: A teaching innovation “challenging” students

Sharyn R. Rundle-Thiele, PhD*

Associate Professor

Faculty of Business, School of Management and Marketing

USQ Springfield Campus, PO Box 4196,

Springfield, Queensland, 4300, Australia

Email: rundle@usq.edu.au

* Presenting and corresponding author

Kerri-Ann L. Kuhn

Griffith Business School, Department of Marketing

Griffith University, Nathan Campus,

Nathan, Queensland, 4111, Australia

Email: k.kuhn@griffith.edu.au

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Abstract

Courses that involve students in challenging, authentic tasks linking students to their peers and educators are associated with high levels of engagement. This paper presents a teaching innovation that was designed to promote student engagement. Currently in its third offering, the ‘Get Marketer Challenge’ is an authentic assessment task; requiring Introduction to Marketing student teams to solve a real-world marketing problem as part of a course-wide competition that is sponsored by industry partners. Educators continue to be surprised by the consistency and high level of effort expended by student teams. Students report the Get Marketer Challenge is an enjoyable assessment task that helped them to understand the many challenges faced by marketers. This innovation would be suitable for any marketing course that is offered where the student cohort has little work experience. The design accommodates a large number of students with a ‘knock-out’ style competition that reduces the number of teams.

Key words: Teaching innovation, marketing education, student engagement, authentic assessment, constructive alignment

Introduction

According to the higher education literature active student engagement during the learning process is an integral part of student training (Buckner and Williams, 1995; Hickman, 1994). Student engagement has also now been linked to both student retention and learning outcomes. Many students are failing to sufficiently engage with their studies for myriad reasons, including a range of work-related and personal priorities (McInnis, 2001). We are seeing a fundamental shift in the way students now see the university experience as they face more complex life patterns and challenges associated with trying to achieve balance (McInnis, 2001). Perhaps Ali and Ho (2007, p.269) put it best - "Today's students have unlimited access to information and the modern challenge facing teachers is motivating students to engage with the subject". The challenge for marketing educators has therefore become, how should we engage our students?

In this paper, we present an assessment innovation, the key objective of which was to engage students in their marketing course. Specifically, we focus on one of the assessment items in the course: the Get Marketer Challenge, a constructively aligned, authentic assessment task, which actively involves student teams in solving real-world marketing problems as part of a course-wide competition. After defining the concept of student engagement and outlining the principles of engaging pedagogy, we describe the Challenge in some detail. We present some data from the two semester offerings, including student enrolment data and analysis of qualitative and quantitative insights gathered from students and the teaching team. Finally, we discuss the implications for teaching and learning research.

Literature Review

Engagement refers to ‘the active involvement, commitment and sense of belonging that dictates the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities’ (Cleary and Skaines, 2005: 1). Engagement is a topic of enduring concern for researchers, educators and policy makers for a number of reasons. Firstly, students who are not engaged lack commitment, which manifests into declining attendance and increased requests for special consideration (often to fit around paid work) (McInnis, 2001), thus creating additional work for teaching and support staff in universities. Secondly, engagement has been linked to student retention and Australian University funding through the Teaching and Learning Performance Fund is now linked directly to student retention (amongst other factors). Finally, engagement in the classroom can serve as a ‘gateway’ for subsequent involvement in the wider academic and social community of the institution (Tinto, 1997).

The higher education literature emphasises the importance of social interaction to facilitate engagement. Indeed, some researchers (see McInnis, 2001, p.11) emphasise the major focus of curriculum and course organisation should be to increase the amount of time students can interact with peers and academics. Key characteristics of engaging pedagogy are: 1) collaborative learning, 2) academically challenging, 3) increased staff-student interaction, and 4) authentic. These will be briefly considered in turn.

Collaborative Learning

Essentially, where academic and social activities are integrated, authentic learning can occur (Newell, 1999). Rather than an instructor imparting their knowledge, students have the opportunity to actively construct and assimilate knowledge themselves through a reciprocal

process with their peers, resulting in a deeper, more personally relevant form of learning (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000; Bruffee, 1995; Schon, 1995). Student-to-student interactions help facilitate higher-order learning and reflection (Peltier, Drago and Schibrowsky, 2003; Hay *et al.*, 2004), as well as stimulate divergent thinking (since students bring their range of ideas and ways of solving problems to the classroom) (Peltier, Hay and Drago, 2005). A more meaningful learning experience can be gained through vision sharing (Van Woerkom, 2004), co-production of outcomes (Biggs, Kember and Leung, 2001), analysing and comparing one's responses to others (Thorpe, 2001), and the development of team leadership skills (Brown and Posner, 2001). Oral skills may also be improved as a result of collaboration with peers in team work, meetings, informal conversations and negotiations (Crosling, 2000). Such skills are particularly important for students commencing study to aid them in their transition to university (McInnis and James, 1995). Overall, active and collaborative learning activities promote student involvement and can lead to a number of positive behaviours such as increased academic effort, openness to diversity, social tolerance, and personal as well as interpersonal development (Cabrera *et al.*, 1998; Pascarella *et al.*, 1996; Whitt *et al.*, 2001).

Challenging

Developmental theory literature suggests that in order to facilitate intellectual and psychological development (and encourage growth and change), educators should design learning environments that challenge and support students (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). For example, when novel situations are presented that require non-routine methods of response and interaction with peers of diverse backgrounds, students are forced to think in different, more complex ways (Baxter-Magolda, 1996; King and Kitchener, 1994). Further, when such situations are tailored for the students' current level of development (in other words they are supportive), students can adapt

appropriately to the challenge (Newman and Newman, 1998). Overall, students learn best in an active learning environment (Drea, Tripp and Stuenkel, 2005). Competition is proposed as a means to increase the challenge associated with an assessment task.

While research has demonstrated a positive relationship between competitiveness (as a personal characteristic) and performance (Helmreich *et al.*, 1980) the role of competition in marketing education has received limited attention. For example, Stutts and West (2005) considered how students perceived the role of competitions sponsored by key industry bodies. Their study identified that students felt strongly that they learned much more in competitive project-based classes like Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) and American Advertising Federation (AAF) than they did in project-based classes that are not competitive in nature. The role of competition in engaging students has not been considered. Assessment that fosters healthy competition may challenge and hence engage students.

Staff-Student Interaction

According to McInnis (2001), the major focus in course organisation and curriculum in general should be to increase the amount of time students can interact with academics. Guidelines offered in the literature suggest that to create an academically challenging environment, staff and students should actively engage and co-produce what is learned (Paswan and Young, 2002; Smart, Kelley and Conant, 2003).

Authentic

The integration of 'work experience' into the higher education curriculum has been identified as a means to not only 'teach' students necessary skills, but have them 'apply' these skills as part of

course work. The application of core skills in the classroom is important for the professional development of students, as part of their preparation to enter the workforce. Equally as important is the need to motivate students to use these skills and practice the necessary theory to which they are exposed through its application. Authentic assessment, which exposes students to the complexities of real world problems, is a means of engaging students and achieving this (McKenzie *et al.*, 2002). Authentic learning is essentially a measure of a curriculum's relevance to the real world graduates will enter (McKenzie *et al.*, 2002). Authentic assessment is therefore that which provides students an opportunity to learn situations, environments, skills, content and tasks that are relevant, realistic, authentic and represent the natural complexities of the real world (Honebein, 1996; Jonassen, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Wilson and Cole, 1991). Such tasks have been found to enhance critical thinking skills and increase motivation, productivity and the quality of student work (Fall, 1998). Authentic assessment also encourages active learning and active student involvement, which positively influence the development of graduate capabilities (Kember and Leung, 2005).

The Get Marketer Challenge

Marketing is an exciting and challenging occupation and many different roles are open to students interested in a career in this field. The Get Marketer Challenge was designed to provide first-year Business and Commerce students with a sample of some of the challenges faced by marketers, and exposure to the wide variety of tasks required in the marketing discipline. Two challenges sponsored by two different companies were set each Semester for student teams, each representing 15% of a student's grade, for a total of 30% of the student's grades. Two challenges were designed to allow teams to gain feedback that would assist them in improving their performance in the second challenge. The first challenge competition commenced in Week 5,

and the second challenge commenced in Week 10¹. The duration of each competition for teams reaching the finals was three weeks.

In the first tutorial, students were randomly allocated into teams of four or five to compete in the Griffith University Get Marketer Challenge. Random allocation was chosen to assist commencing students to get to know their peers. The Get Marketer Challenge was structured as follows (illustrated in Figure 1):

1. Teams had to demonstrate that their idea for solving a specified marketing problem was based on consumer insights. Teams were instructed that they could question friends, family and other university students and/or observe consumers or use known credible secondary data sources.
2. Teams had to present an innovative solution for the problem. Each team had a maximum of five minutes to pitch their solution.
3. The winning team from each tutorial was then invited to present the following week in their lecture. Once again, teams were allocated a maximum of five minutes for presentations during the lecture time.
4. The winning team from each university campus was then invited to present to the company sponsoring the challenge.

Take in Figure 1 about here

¹ Teaching semesters were a thirteen week duration at this University.

Judging for each Get Marketer Challenge competition occurred as follows. Students were asked to vote for their peers in tutorials and lectures, while company representatives voted for the final winner. Each student completed a student voting form. Students were asked to vote 1 for the best team, 2 for the second best and 3 for the third best team. Students were asked not to vote for their own team. All students submitted their votes to their tutors and/or lecturers at the completion of the class. The team receiving the most student first preference and overall votes won their respective round. The overall winning team received a small cash prize of \$AUD200 and all finalists received a certificate to acknowledge their success in reaching the final.

Method used to assess the teaching innovation

In the first Semester of offering a learning outcomes survey based on recommendations by Pratt (1997) was used along with standard University teaching and course evaluations. Unsolicited emails from teaching staff, students and sponsoring organisations were used to supplement student evaluation data.

Reflections on the Get Marketer Challenge

The Get Marketer Challenge, designed as a competition with rewards on offer, promoted co-operation and collaboration within the groups, but competition between them. Furthermore, the Get Marketer Challenge fostered student engagement and collaborative learning, providing a valuable learning experience. Student enrolments, coupled with student, educator and other stakeholder feedback reflect these outcomes. These are now reported in turn.

Student Reflections on the Get Marketer Challenge

A comment from one of the winning team members of the first Get Marketer Challenge summarises the student experience:

“It was a great confidence booster to have a glimpse of success in the corporate world. It was a great idea because it gave us practical insight into how marketing works from a product development point of view. We conducted a lot of surveys about beer consumption within our target market and many people independently nominated (our chosen product concept)”.

Student feedback was sought at the end of the first Semester. We asked students what was particularly HELPFUL to their learning in Introduction to Marketing. Responses to this open-ended question highlight the significance of the challenges to students’ learning of the principles of marketing. When asked what was particularly helpful to their progress on the course goals, approximately one-half (51%) of students who answered the question highlighted some aspect of the Get Marketer Challenges. Students commented these presentations were “practical and thought-provoking”, “interesting” and “enjoyable”. The competition structure was designed to challenge students and feedback suggests this was a pleasing aspect.

“The Get Marketer Challenge was fun, interesting and rewarding, especially the fact we were able to present in a lecture. This should definitely continue”.

“We were so excited when we received your call. We thought we had done enough to pass. We didn’t think that we would win through to the second round of competition.”

Students highlighted the significance of these items in helping them to understand real marketing problems and the role of marketing in business. This feedback provides support for the propositions that authentic and challenging tasks assist to engage students.

“The presentations helped me to understand (that) innovative solutions can solve marketing problems.”

“They enabled me to understand exactly some of the challenges faced by marketers.”

Student comments also reflect the importance of collaboration for this assessment task and the student-staff interaction. Students indicated that they learnt not only from their own participation in the challenge, but from watching and voting on other student presentations. Selected student comments are presented below.

“Group work allowed us to share our information and improve knowledge”.

“Receiving group feedback and evaluating each other was helpful”.

“The different group presentations illustrated strengths and weaknesses of how the 4Ps could be used”.

“The team projects and seeing what other teams do when they interpret the questions was helpful. I noticed how different groups saw consumer wants differently”.

Student feedback highlights the importance of developing assessment that engages students. The literature demonstrates that generally assessment is the one course component students tend to dislike, particularly oral presentations which they consider to be of limited effectiveness as learning activities (Karns, 2006). In our experience, some students actually requested the incorporation of additional challenges to facilitate further progress on course goals. This may be due to the fact that the Get Marketer Challenge engages students, similar to internships and case discussions which, according to Karns (2006) students tend to value.

Educator and Stakeholder Reflections on the Get Marketer Challenge

Student teams approached the Get Marketer Challenge in myriad ways, with some teams developing online discussion boards to gather consumer insights, while others resorted to surveying their target population. Some teams invested considerable time and effort in the challenges. For example, one team (which reached round 2 of the competition) surveyed three hundred people to gather preferences before developing their solution to the challenge. Another team competing in the final round developed superhero characters and costumes to promote their ideas to children, and yet another finalist team developed a series of television advertisements. The teaching team was surprised by the level of effort expended by some students.

“I was pleasantly surprised by how good they all were.”

Student teams developed innovative solutions to address real world problems and this was acknowledged by sponsors of the Get Marketer Challenge.

“It was great to meet yourself and your students earlier this week. I was very impressed with the work that they had done and the thinking that had gone into it. I am a big believer that the best ideas are often ‘the simplest and in hindsight, the most obvious’. It would have been great to spend more time discussing it.”

One rewarding aspect for the teaching team was that students did appear to learn from the first challenge. The winning students of the second Get Marketer Challenge advised that they used feedback gained in the first competition to improve their ‘marketing process. Company representatives chose this team as one challenge winner, based on the “rigorous marketing process used”. The team developed alternate communication concepts based on their initial survey research using a convenience sample. They then conducted further research to test the alternate concepts, choosing the concept that had the greatest appeal to the target market, which is considered best practice in marketing.

The course outline was recently shared with a colleague, whose reaction was:

“I am bowled over. (This course) has changed so much from when I was once around at (your institution). Congratulations - so much more for students than is usually offered. I'm sure it will go down well, and it is really pushing the students to go for good outcomes. I am most impressed... feel like enrolling!”

A final aspect of the Get Marketer Challenge that was particularly pleasing was the Challenge encouraged staff to engage and interact frequently with student teams winning the first round of the competition. Tutors and lecturers spent time with teams assisting them to improve their presentation for subsequent competition rounds. A small degree of rivalry emerged and was clearly evident in one teacher's email to students:

“Remember (Campus name) rules...”

Conclusions and future directions

Despite the great deal of positive feedback, some problems were identified. When student feedback on the course was sought in order to fine-tune the Get Marketer Challenge for Semester 1, 2007, two key issues for consideration emerged - the length of time between the challenges and the number of challenges. Firstly, student feedback suggested the assessment schedule needed to be changed to provide more time in between the two challenges. The teaching team concurred, as teams progressing in the first Get Marketer Challenge were still competing when work should have been underway for the second. The schedule was changed and the time between challenges was extended by two weeks in the second offering. The second issue related to the number of Get Marketer Challenges that should be offered in the course. Student opinions differed in this regard. Some students advised that two Get Marketer Challenges was onerous. This cohort recommended the workload should be reduced to just one. Other students however indicated two challenges were necessary as they learnt a great deal from the first, and enjoyed the opportunity to apply this knowledge as part of the second presentation. This feedback was considered by the teaching team and the decision was made to continue with two challenges in

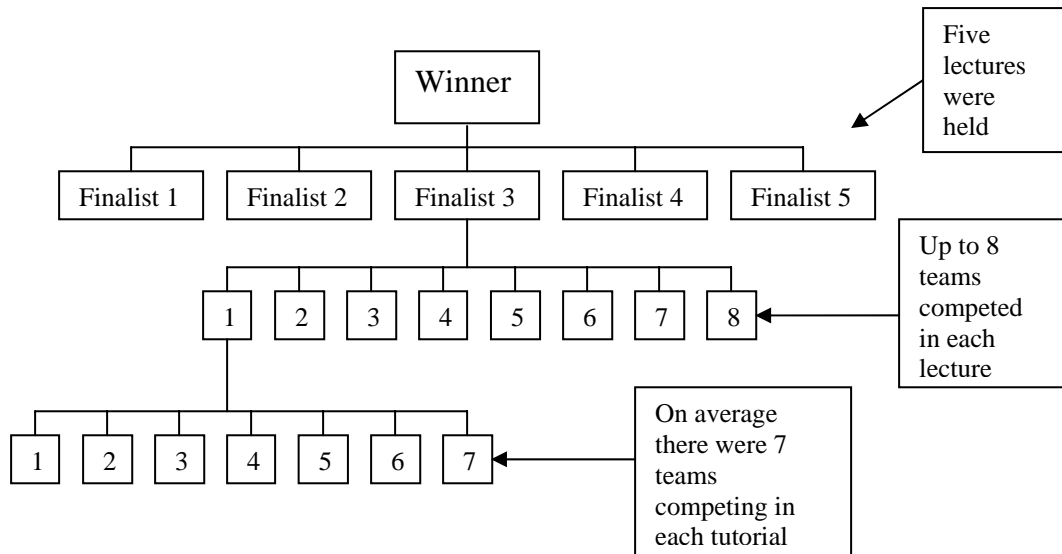
future course offerings. A key driver behind this decision was teams who won the second Get Marketer Challenge used the feedback from their first presentation to improve, and indeed, win the second challenge.

A final modification that was made for the second offering of the Get Marketer Challenge was to increase the prizes available to the overall winning team. It was felt this would better reflect the level of effort expended by students participating in the final rounds of the competition. In the first year, student teams had the opportunity to win a prize valued at \$200 for each challenge. Sponsorship has increased in the second offering and the winning team will receive a \$500 cash prize and the offer to undertake work experience in Marketing with the sponsoring organisation. The third offering has witnessed another increase with a prize value of \$1,000 agreed upon for the third Get Marketer Challenge offering.

This innovation would be suitable for any marketing course that is offered where the student cohort has little work experience. The design accommodates a large number of students with a 'knock-out' style competition that reduces the number of teams. This allows instructors to take a few representative teams to organisations for the final competition round. The format also allows instructors to mentor teams prior to their final presentation at the company, ensuring that students are suitable ambassadors for the University that they represent.

Figure 1

The Get Marketer Competition Structure



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