

An exploratory study on assessment of creativity in first-year undergraduate marketing units

Tania von der Heide, Southern Cross University

Abstract

Marketing is perceived as an innately creative discipline, one which offers creative solutions to consumer problems. Yet little attention has been given by researchers into how students acquire knowledge of creativity and how it is assessed in introductory marketing units. This paper examines how creativity is assessed as a learning outcome in fifteen Australian universities' first year undergraduate marketing units within a Business program. Results of the analysis of unit statements showed that universities had achieved an aligned course design with respect to creativity learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment. Integrating the creative problem solving process in a marketing task, such as a group-worked marketing plan, is suggested as a way forward.

Key words: marketing education, creativity, assessment,

A graduate attribute curriculum

The truth about an education system and its curriculum can be found in the spirit and style of student assessment (Rowntree 1977). Reflecting the principle that ‘what gets measured, gets done’, students tend to direct their learning effort to completing assessment tasks. An assessment encompasses any circumstances in which selected features of a student’s education are measured (Lloyd-Jones & Bray 1986). These features are variously referred to as graduate or generic attributes or learning outcomes. Graduate attributes are defined by the Higher Education Council of Australia (1992) report *Achieving Quality* as “the skills, personal attributes and values which should be acquired by all graduates, regardless of their discipline or field of study” (p.20). They should include critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, ability to problem solve, independent thought, ethical practice, communication, creativity and integrity (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann 2004).

Universities have always been concerned with students’ generic attributes, albeit implicitly, in so far as they aspired to produce socially responsible citizens with well-cultivated intellects (Jones 2002). In recent times, the employability of university graduates has been driving the development of graduate attributes. Government funding in higher education is becoming increasingly linked to performance indicators, such as the level of employer satisfaction with graduate skills (Jones 2002). Hence, the higher education sector is placing increasing value on its role in the development and embedding of generic skills or graduate learning outcomes into the learning experiences of students (Bath, Smith et al. 2004; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini 2004; Jones 2002), particularly in ways that students will encounter in jobs (Trelaven & Voola 2008).

Universities are moving from the traditional course design model, where aims and objectives dictate content, which in turn dictates assessment to an aligned course design, where aims, objectives and graduate attributes dictate assessment with content being developed afterwards (Munn 2003). There is a clear imperative for universities internationally to integrate these attributes as a result of government and accreditation pressures (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business 2007). Constructive alignment of learning outcomes, expressed in terms of graduate attributes, with learning activities, assessment tasks and assessment criteria is a way forward to developing the employability skills (Trelaven & Voola 2008). Effective assessments provide a further stimulus for learning (Dean & Cowley 2009; Lizzio & Wilson 2004).

Creativity as a graduate attribute

Information may be the currency of modern business, but ideas provide the seeds for its growth and prosperity (Titus 2000). The pivotal role of creativity in modern business success has been widely acknowledged by the academic community. Couger (1995) posits creativity to be a key resource in producing competitive advantage, while Levitt (1986) considers creativity of the ‘marketing imagination’ to be the starting point for success in marketing. Yet, according to research by ACNielsen (2000), one of the most common graduate skill deficiencies cited by employers included a lack of creativity and flair. Indeed, a lack of creativity has been observed in the classroom (Dodds 1998; Gilbert, Prenshaw & Ivy 1996; Ramocki 1994).

This has led several marketing educators (notably all from the United States) to investigate the marketing-creativity connection, in particular the viability of introducing creativity instruction in terms of specific idea-generating techniques (Jacobs 1984; McIntyre 1993), exercises (Ramocki 1996), and courses (Dodds 1998; Eriksson & Hauer 2004; Gilbert, Prenshaw & Ivy 1996). Past research has also repeatedly viewed creativity in marketing as a problem-solving activity (Anderson 2006; Eriksson & Hauer 2004; Lunsford 1990) that involves the development of unique solutions to customer problems (Titus 2000, 2007).

Creativity in the context of problem solving requires that the solutions be both novel and appropriate to the task at hand (Amabile 1983), whereby the task is heuristic (i.e. without a clear or easily identifiable path to the solution) rather than algorithmic in nature (Titus 2000). With its methodical, disciplined and sustained cognitive effort (Couger 1995; Gilbert, Prenshaw & Ivy 1996), the creative problem solving (CPS) process is ideally suited to the pedagogical context (Titus 2000). The marketing process is a direct application of the CPS process, which commences with a problem-finding phase and concludes with solution-finding and solution-implementing activities (Titus 2000).

While the uptake of creativity instruction appears to be on the rise in the United States, there is little evidence of Australian marketing educators' incorporating creativity in the curriculum, and there is virtually no published literature on the assessment of creativity as a graduate attribute. This paper attempts to provide some initial insights into how creativity is taught and assessed in first-year marketing units in the Bachelor of Business courses offered by Australian universities.

Methodology

To inform this research objective, recent and sufficiently detailed unit statements of first-year marketing unit offerings in Australian university business programs were required. These were sourced from students' advanced standing applications to the author's university, as well as online. The author was able to obtain unit statements with adequate information on graduate attributes, teaching and assessment from 15 of Australia's 37 public universities. The documents were content-analysed in relation to creativity graduate attributes, teaching and assessment.

Profile and comparison of sample universities

This section profiles the 15 universities in the sample in terms of a variety of characteristics. It highlights the cross-sectional nature of the sample, which could be considered broadly representative of Australian universities.

The different resourcing and performance characteristics of the sample universities are presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. As shown in Table 1, nearly one-third (32.5%) of undergraduate students in Australia are enrolled in Business courses. Yet academic staff numbers in the Management and Commerce discipline group account for an average of only 10.5% of equivalent full-time academic staff. This means that the share of business students enrolled at Australian universities is on average three times greater than the share of business academics assigned to teaching the discipline. The two universities which most closely match student share with share of academics (ratio of 1.4) are Swinburne University and SCU. By contrast, UQ has the highest ratio of student share to share of academics (3.9). Clearly, the level of academic educator resourcing relative to students has important implications for curriculum design, teaching and assessment.

Table 1 Business academics and students at sample universities (2005)

University	Undergrad. student load in Business, in % share	Academic staff numbers in M&C (% share of FTE)	Student share to academic share for Business
Canberra Uni.	44.9	19.7	2.3
Central Queensland Uni.	43.4	13.3	3.3
Curtin Uni.	42.8	14.9	2.9
Griffith Uni.	38.7	16.6	2.3
James Cook Uni.	21.2	7.4	2.9
Macquarie Uni.	54.5	17.1	3.2
Newcastle Uni.	17.2	6.3	2.7
Queensland Uni. of Technology	31.3	12.1	2.6
Southern Cross Uni.	42.2	29.4	1.4
Swinburne Uni.	38.0	27.3	1.4
Tasmania Uni.	22.6	6.0	3.8
Uni. of Queensland	22.4	5.8	3.9
Uni. of South Australia	27.9	16.4	1.7
Uni. of Western Sydney	33.5	15.1	2.2
Wollongong Uni.	31.7	11.0	2.9
National average	32.5	10.5	3.1

(Adapted from University of Melbourne 2007)

Table 2 Performance of sample universities (2005)

	Specialisation index	Total research#	Teaching & learning#: Undergraduate student satisfaction	Teaching & learning #: Entrance score	Rank in international standing#	AACSB (2010) accredited
Canberra	59.9	4.0	86.5	86.4	27	X
CQU	40.4	3.5	75.6	83.7	36	X
Curtin	20.6	15.6	87.2	91.1	17	X
Griffith	25.0	22.8	86.8	86.1	14	√
JCU	19.4	10.4	89.7	84.0	24	X
Macquarie	54.4	24.2	87.5	96.8	9	X
Newcastle	22.6	21.8	84.0	87.9	13	X
QUT	27.4	28.2	84.1	90.1	10	√
SCU	48.8	7.1	93.7	69.7	27	X
Swinburne	76.3	9.3	93.3	79.4	26	X
Tasmania	23.5	17.9	86.3	84.3	14	X
UQ	30.2	82.1	86.6	95.6	4	√
UniSA	35.6	16.1	84.7	78.7	20	X
UWS	28.5	16.4	80.4	71.0	24	X
Wollong.	35.3	20.0	96.4	88.0	11	X

(University of Melbourne 2007) # scope-adjusted * <http://www.australian-universities.com/rankings/>

The specialisation index provided in Table 2 reflects the scope of the sample's university offerings among ten discipline areas, with the most specialised university scoring 100. It is desirable that performances take account of the scope of an institution (University of Melbourne 2007). The scope-adjusted teaching and learning performance in terms of undergraduate student satisfaction for the sample lies within a relatively narrow band, ranging from 79.9% (Central Queensland University, CQU) to 93.7% (for SCU). Another teaching and learning indicator, entrance score, shows more dispersion. Within the sample, Macquarie University attracts top students (98.9) while SCU students' have the lowest entrance scores (69.7). Considerable dispersion of total research performance scores - measured as a simple average of seven research attributes (including publications, citations, grants and doctoral completions) - is evident in the sample. Top research performer, UQ scored 23 times higher than poorest performer, CQU and approximately 3 to 5 times higher than other universities. The index of international standing in Table 2 combines the results for research and teaching,

adjusting for scope. It shows that universities in the sample were spread across the field. Four universities in the sample are AACSB accredited or awaiting accreditation.

Results: Creativity in teaching and assessment

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3. Two-thirds of universities recognise some form of creativity as a graduate attribute, whereby the construction of this attribute varies considerably. Four universities conceive creativity as a stand-alone attribute, while the other six regard creativity as a function of problem solving, applied knowledge or critical thinking. Despite an apparent commitment by most universities to creativity as a learning outcome, none explicitly teach creativity skills. An assessment of creativity skills through explicit marking criteria is undertaken in only one university. SCU assesses creativity within individual students' oral presentations, with creativity contributing 5% to the final grade. Overall, within the sample of universities studied, including three with AACSB accreditation, there is no evidence of an aligned course design in relation to creativity-oriented learning outcomes.

Table 3 Creativity in first-year marketing units for Business degree

	Year	Creativity as graduate attribute or skill	Creativity explicitly taught in curriculum	Creativity explicitly assessed in marking criteria
Canberra	2008	Problem solving: critical and creative thinking	No	No
CQU	2009	No	No	No
Curtin	2008	Critical and creative thinking	No	No
Griffith*	2009	Creativity and innovation	No	No
JCU	2006	No	No	No
Macquarie	2008	N/A	No	No
Newcastle	2009	No	No	No
QUT*	2010	No	No	No
SCU	2010	Creativity	No	Yes, 5%
Swinburne	2010	Entrepreneurial in contributing toward innovation	No	n/a
Tasmania	2010	Problem-solving: critical and creative thinking	No	No
UQ*	2007	Independence and creativity	No	No
UniSA	2010	Problem solving: critical and creative thinking	No	No
UWS	2010	Applies knowledge: applies creative skills	No	No
Wollong.	2008	Innovative and flexible	No	No

* AACSB accredited

Discussion and conclusion

The uptake of creativity as graduate attribute by most Australian universities sampled is encouraging. However, the failure of these universities, including the top-ranked one, to align this learning outcome with teaching curriculum and assessment marking criteria is perplexing. That the rhetoric on the need for an aligned course design is not being heeded is consistent with findings that the implementation of generic graduate attributes curricula on the whole has been patchy within universities worldwide (Barrie 2006; Drummond, Nixon & Wiltshire 1998; Jones 2002). James (2002) observed that assessment is one of the least sophisticated

aspects of university teaching and learning and is often not firmly integrated with teaching and learning processes.

The inherent conservatism in universities is a major inhibitor to the renewal of assessment (James 2002). There is a strong emphasis on final examination and the culture of 'testing' is strong, though this tendency runs counter to most pedagogical thinking (Scouller 1998; Tang 1994). Impediments to high quality assessment include larger class sizes and heightened academic workloads, multiple delivery modes and modes of student participation (James 2002), diverse student cohorts, high student to academic staff ratios and a focus on research rather than teaching performance. These results highlight that research and teaching are very different kinds of activities and that good performance in one often competes with good performance in the other (Vroom 2007).

It is possible that the development of creativity skills might be occurring in later marketing units for student committed to a marketing degree or marketing major, implying that creativity is an advanced skill, not a genuinely generic graduate attribute. Even so, this initial study shows that universities are not consistently producing business graduates with creative abilities. They are failing to prepare students to enter and sustain a career in business and/or management, which increasingly relies on creativity as a driver of innovation and organisational success. The role of creativity skills in business degrees is currently unclear and underappreciated, warranting further debate within business schools and between institutions.

Given the affinity of creativity and marketing, marketing educators are well-placed to lead the discourse and, indeed, the design and implementation of inspired pedagogical reform through curriculum reform relating to graduate attributes. A natural way to align the development of students' creativity skills with assessment is through an experiential learning project, such as a marketing plan. Rather than specifying an existing product, the identification and development of a new market offering could be framed around the creative problem solving process, as suggested by Titus (2000). Students can be formally introduced to the process through a teaching workshop early in the semester. Formal assessment can occur at one or more points of delivering the marketing plan. Creativity can be measured in terms of 'a demonstrated commitment to achieving an imaginative and creative response' by attending to each of the steps to the creative problem-solving process and, additionally, to the components of marketing strategy. Students' creative learning outcomes can be extended through other instructional and assessment techniques, such as Titus' (2007) creative marketing breakthrough model or Eriksson and Hauer's (2004) innovative syllabus for a creative approach in developing marketing skills. Based on the premise that 20% of content results in 80% of learning foundation, the pedagogy focuses on a three-stage convergent-divergent-convergent process to encourage students' critical thinking.

There is considerable scope to professionalise student assessment practices at Australian universities' business schools, especially with creativity-oriented learning outcomes. A number of instructional and assessment approaches for creativity skills exist which can be applied to a wide spectrum of marketing problems and courses. Institutions and marketing educators would benefit from greater exploration of the possibilities for using creativity assessment as a more sophisticated and strategic tool for helping shape more effective teaching and learning processes and produce 'outstanding business graduates'.

References

ACNielsen Research Services 2000, *Employer satisfaction with graduate skills*, Research report.

Amabile, TM 1983, 'The social psychology of creativity: A componential conceptualisation', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 2, pp. 357-76.

Anderson, L 2006, 'Building confidence in creativity: MBA students', *Marketing Education Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 91-6.

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business 2007, *AACSB assurance of learning standards: An interpretation*, <<http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/papers/AOLPaper-final-11-20-07.pdf/>>.

—— 2010, *Schools accredited in business - ordered by country/region, state, name*, viewed 24 June 2010, <<https://www.aacsb.net/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=AACSB&WebKey=00E50DA9-8BB0-4A32-B7F7-0A92E98DF5C6/>>.

Barrie, SC 2006, 'Understanding what we mean by the generic attributes of graduates', *Higher Education B*, pp. 215-41.

Bath, D, Smith, C, Stein, S & Swann, R 2004, 'Beyond mapping and embedding graduate attributes: Bringing together quality assurance and action learning to create a validated and living curriculum', *Higher Education Research & Development*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 313-28.

Couger, JD 1995, *Creative problem solving and opportunity finding*, Boyd & Fraser, Danvers, MA.

Crebert, G, Bates, M, Bell, B, Patrick, C-J & Cragnolini, V 2004, 'Developing generic skills and university, during work placement and in employment: Graduate perceptions', *Higher Education Research & Development*, vol. 23, no. 2 (May), pp. 147-65.

Dean, AM & Cowley, K 2009, 'Creating a foundation for generic skills by embedding information literacy in commencing student assessment tasks', paper presented to Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy, Melbourne, <<http://www.duplication.net.au/ANZMAC09/Papers.html/>>.

Dodds, WB 1998, 'Bringing creativity and innovation into the marketing classroom', in *Western Marketing Educators' Conference*, vol. 22, pp. 63-6.

Drummond, I, Nixon, I & Wiltshire, J 1998, 'Personal transferable skills in higher education: The problems of implementing good practice', *Quality Assurance in Education*, vol. 6, pp. 44-58.

Eriksson, LT & Hauer, AM 2004, 'Mind map marketing: A creative approach in developing marketing skills', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 174-87.

Gilbert, FW, Prenshaw, PJ & Ivy, TT 1996, 'A preliminary assessment of the effectiveness of creativity training in marketing', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 18, no. Fall, pp. 46-56.

Higher Education Council Australia 1992, *Achieving quality*, Canberra.

Jacobs, LW 1984, 'Brainstorming: The marketing experience', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 6, no. Fall, pp. 50-6.

James, R 2002, 'Academic standards and the assessment of student learning: Some current issues in Australian higher education', Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Jones, J 2002, 'Generic attributes: An agenda for reform or control', in *Changing Identities: Proceedings of the Language and Academic Skills Conference*, University of Wollongong.

Levitt, T 1986, *The marketing imagination*, Free Press, New York.

Lizzio, A & Wilson, K 2004, 'First-year students' perceptions of capability', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 109-28.

Lloyd-Jones, R & Bray, E 1986, *Assessment from Principles to Action*, Macmillan, London.

Lunsford, DA 1990, 'Developing creative problem solving skills in marketing case analysis', *Marketing Education Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 62-29.

McIntyre, RP 1993, 'An approach to fostering creativity in marketing', *Marketing Education Review*, vol. 3, pp. 33-6.

Munn, T 2003, 'Effective assessment: Do students learn what we are teaching?', University of South Australia.

Ramocki, SP 1994, 'Is it time to teach creativity throughout the marketing curriculum', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 16, no. Summer, pp. 15-25.

—— 1996, 'Developing creative marketing graduates', *Marketing Education Review*, vol. 6, no. Spring, pp. 47-53.

Rowntree, D 1977, *Assessing students: How shall we know them?*, Harper and Row, London.

Scouller, K 1998, 'The influence of assessment method on students' learning approaches: Multiple choice question examination versus assignment essay', *Higher Education*, vol. 35, pp. 453-72.

Tang, C 1994, 'Effects of modes of assessment on students' preparation strategies', in G Gibbs (ed.), *Improving student learning: Theory and Practice*, Oxford Centre for Staff Development, Oxford.

Titus, PA 2000, 'Marketing and the creative problem-solving process', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 225-35.

—— 2007, 'Applied creativity: The creative marketing breakthrough model', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 262-72.

Trelaven, L & Voola, R 2008, 'Integrating the development of graduate attributes through constructive alignment', *Journal of Marketing Education*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 160-93.

University of Melbourne 2007, *Ranking Australian universities: Controlling for scope*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne, VIC, <<http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/>>.

Vroom, VH 2007, 'On the synergy between research and teaching', *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 31, no. 3 (June), pp. 365-75.