

Undergraduate marketing students' preferred class and assessment activities

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Abstract

Despite the growth in marketing education literature, there has been a limited focus into understanding undergraduate marketing students' preferred Teaching and Learning Pedagogies (TLP) concerning class and assessment activities (Reardon, Payan, Miller and Alexander 2008; Biggs 2006). In order to improve the quality of delivering marketing education it is necessary to understand the prior knowledge/learning experiences of students as they transition through their undergraduate degree. Three focus groups were conducted consisting of first, second and third year undergraduate marketing students at a large Sydney university. Focus groups allowed for an in-depth exploration revealing an association between prior knowledge of students and their preferred TLPs.

Keywords: Teaching and Learning Pedagogies, class and assessment activities, undergraduate marketing student preferences.

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Introduction and background

There appears to be limited research into understanding undergraduate marketing student's teaching and learning preferences for class and assessment activities (Ramsden, 2003). Biggs (2006) identifies differing pedagogies in terms of teaching methods and strategies which include class and assessment activities for student centred learning. According to Felder and Brent (2005), students' approach learning tasks differently as they progress through their university degree. This may be attributed to their diversity, such as gender, age, ethnicity, motivations, intellectual development and prior knowledge (or their pre-existing knowledge). Prior knowledge may be constructed from three related factors to include student attitudes, experiences and knowledge (Cagiltay, Yildirim and Aksu, 2006; Cook, 2006). This prior or pre-existing knowledge may be gained from alternative access paths, usually either, Higher School Certificate (HSC), Australian Technical Educational System (TAFE) or a preparatory college pathway process (Cagiltay, Yildirim and Aksu, 2006; Cook, 2006; Felder and Brent, 2005; Hunt, Eagle and Kitchen, 2004; Schommer-Aikins, 2004; Paulsen and Feldman, 1999).

Current literature within the area of educational psychology, suggests that higher education and marketing have long been employing the active versus passive paradigms as a way in which to classify Teaching and Learning Pedagogies (TLP) (Biggs, 2006; Tonks, 2002). A study by Nulty and Barrett (1996) found that business students prefer pedagogies that are active and concrete. Active pedagogies place students at the centre of the learning process (Biggs, 2006; Tonks, 2002; Peterson, 2001). The successful implementation of such teaching strategies may involve three requirements which include: prior class preparation, the ability to breakdown impersonal barriers to communication and dealing with a certain level of ambiguity (Peterson, 2001). Literature suggests that active teaching strategies may impact upon student motivation, enhanced intellectual development and the ability to connect new topics learnt to life experiences (Diamond, Koerning and Iqbal, 2008; Biggs, 2006; Tonks, 2002; Peterson, 2001).

Furthermore, TLPs can be classified based on the way in which they are directed (Biggs, 2006). Depending on the way in which the TLP is directed, whether by the teacher, peers or self it may have implications on the type of engagement the learners' experience (Biggs, 2006). Several factors may alter a TLP from being teacher, peer or self directed. These factors include, but are not limited to, the degree of difficulty in learning the content, resources, class size and time (Biggs, 2006; Tonks, 2002).

Teacher directed activities are considered to be relatively more formal in nature with dominant control held by the instructor (Biggs, 2006). The notable benefits of engaging in teacher directed activities include the provision of guidance, structure and student support (Biggs, 2006; Tonks, 2002). Peer directed activities can be both formal (initiated by teacher) or informal in nature (collaboration outside of class time) (Biggs, 2006). Current literature proposes that in order to equip students with the skills necessary to function within a business environment it is important for them practice cooperation, compromise, communication and collaboration so as to build up a team oriented culture (Barr, Dixon and Gassenheimer, 2005). On the other hand, self directed activities are those conducted independently by the learner; for example reflective journal writing (Biggs, 2006). These types of activities are often preferred by students who like to work alone avoiding the high level of social interaction that usually occurs in peer directed learning (Barr, Dixon and Gassenheimer, 2005).

Subsequent to this analysis of relevant literature, it is apparent that only a limited number of studies have assessed pre-existing or prior knowledge of students as it relates to their preferred TLPs. This paper examines: the preferred TLP of undergraduate marketing students, exploring the initial class and assessment preferences of students as they begin their degree and how such preferences evolve as students' transition from first, second and third year studies.

Methodology

This paper employed case research methodology for theory development in understanding students' preferred TLPs. Case research is suited to areas of contemporary marketing education, where there is limited academic research (Perry, 1998; Yin, 1994). Focus Groups explored student experiences in their preferred TLPs. Focus groups allowed participants to openly share their learning experiences and reflect upon their preferred TLP's in Marketing units.

Undergraduate students were recruited to participate in focus groups. The researcher sought approval from unit coordinators and an announcement was given in week 13 lectures seeking volunteer students to share their student experiences in their preferred TLPs. The volunteer students were provided with a participation sheet and a content form.

Three focus groups were formed. Focus group one consisted of six participants, whilst, focus group two and focus group three had four participants each. Each focus group was video recorded, with the expressed consent of participants, so as to aid in the transcription of dialogue. Focus groups were designed to be semi-structured in nature; the rationale behind such a design is based on allowing for both the flexibility of free flowing dialogue whilst ensuring that the moderator maintains some level of control in strategically directing the discussion so as to elicit responses that are relevant to fulfilling research aims of the study. While seated around a table each participant was given the opportunity to introduce themselves to the group following that a warm up activity was conducted to instigate student reflections of their preferred TLPs. During this activity, participants were presented with 15 flash cards that identified, using images and words, a range of TLPs' including Video Clips, PowerPoint Presentations, Journal Writing, Drama Conventions, Role Play, Case Studies/Real Life Examples, Oral Presentations, Industry Project, Guest Speakers, Teacher explaining the material, Multiple choice quiz, Online learning, Report writing, Essay writing and Lecture notes (the TLPs on the flashcards were determined from the literature related to teaching and learning i.e. Diamond, Koerning and Iqbal, 2008; Biggs, 2006; Cook, 2006; Barr, Dixon and Gassenheimer, 2005 ; Rodrigues 2004; Tonks 2002; Peterson 2001). These flash cards were used as a warm up exercise to refresh students' memory allowing them to reflect upon their experiences with these class and assessment activities. To ensure that the discussion was not limited to the TLPs presented on these cards alone each participant was encouraged to identify and discuss any activities they experienced. Focus groups ran between 60-70minutes in duration.

Findings and data analysis

At the completion of the focus groups video recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were then sorted and coded for further thematic analysis using the qualitative data analysis software program Nvivo 8. Cross case analysis was performed across the three focus groups. This

analysis was undertaken in what is known as a variable oriented approach which centres on identifying one variable or categories of variables across all cases (Yin, 1993). In order to better understand student learning preferences two categories of prior knowledge (the variable) were identified as a basis of analysis across the focus groups, these include participant 'entry' status to university (HSC or TAFE/College) and their level of degree completion (1st, 2nd or 3rd year students). Participants were organised into four groups: HSC Yr1, which included four participants (column 1); HSC Yr2, comprised of three (column 2), HSCYr3, there were four (column 3) and finally TAFE/College Yr1, had three (column 4). The validity of this study is strengthened by the diverse composition of participants who have the authority to provide insight on the research issue at hand.

Table 1: Cross Case Analysis: Student TLP Preferences

HSC Yr1 (Column 1)	HSC Yr2 (Column 2)	HSC Yr3 (Column 3)	TAFE/College Yr1 (Column 4)
Drama Conventions and Role Play Activity			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Low • Confidence: Low • Preference: Low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Medium • Confidence: Medium • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Medium • Confidence: High • Preference: High
Oral Presentation Activity			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Medium • Confidence: Low • Preference: Medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: Medium • Preference: Medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High
Discussion Activity			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: Low • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: Low • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High
Report Writing			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence Low • Preference: Low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High
Journal Writing Activity			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Low • Confidence: Low • Preference: Medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Medium • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: High • Confidence: High • Preference: High 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience: Low • Confidence: Low • Preference: Medium

Source: Developed for this research.

Table 1., summarises dominant themes across the three focus groups revealing students' experiences, confidence and preference for particular class and assessment activities based on a rank of high, medium and low levels. This table presents the five key TLPs which generated the most discussion across the three focus groups, they include Drama convention and Role play activity; Oral presentations; Discussion activity; Report writing and Journal writing activity. Through content analysis it was observed that as students progressed through their marketing degree from first, second and third year studies their preferences for TLPs evolved. The following is an analysis of the five key themes which emerge from this study along with indicative quotations to support the student preferences and provide further insight.

Pedagogy One: Drama conventions and Role Plays

When discussing drama conventions and role plays it was found that students within the HSC1 category had 'low levels of experience and confidence and would prefer not to participate in such activities. The confidence level was seen to increase as the students engaged in more drama activities and role plays essentially strengthening their preference. Students from groups HSC2, HSC3 and TAFE/College1 ranked this activity as being highly preferred. Initially, the students found the experience of participating in these activities as being quite confronting. For example: (HSC3): *"I definitely didn't embrace it immediately"*. Students reflected on the fact that overtime and with regular exposure their level of

confidence and preference for engaging in drama and roles play activities increased, and quite often became the most preferred TLP. This finding further supported the current literature (Biggs, 2006).

Pedagogy two: Oral presentation

Students in group HSC3 justify their strengthened preference for this activity based on the familiarity that they have with class mates. (HSC3): *...I think in the first year I was more nervous doing presentations, I think after doing them over a few subjects it has made it a lot easier. Also when you get to second and third year it is common that you would know a lot of the people in your class...* It was evident that students in the TAFE/College1 group preferred engaging in creative oral presentations as they had experience with this TLP prior to entering university. (TAFE/College1): *I went to TAFE which was filled with presentations. It was more hands on. I prefer them, the more theatrical the better.* Whereas students in the HSC1 category had low level of experience and confidence and as such do not prefer to engage in oral presentations. For example: (HSC1): *"I'd rather not be the one presenting"*. This finding provided new insights into the literature and this needs to be further explored.

Pedagogy three: Discussion activity

Across all categories, experience and preference with this TLP was classified as high. When questioned on the type of direction students preferred, whether teacher, peer or self directed distinctions between the categories were observed. HSC1 and HSC2 students were adamant that for group discussion to be a preferred activity it is important that the teacher directs the task for two main reasons. Firstly these participants find it difficult to generate a discussion and interact with their peers and secondly it is often the case that without teacher direction, students can so easily get off topic. For example (HSC1): *"I'd rather the teacher directing the discussion ... it gives it more structure"*. In contrast, students in group HSC3 and TAFE/College1 appreciate the positive experience of engaging in brainstorming and group discussion activities preferring the freedom of peer directed discussions. (HSC3): *I find a lot more people are open and honest about their opinions when it's just the 4 or 5 of you talking as oppose to the teacher questioning us.* This finding also provided new insights into the literature and this needs to be further explored.

The following two pedagogies which include report writing and journal writing activities provide further support to the current literature (Barr, Dixon and Gassenheimer, 2005; Tonks, 2002; Peterson, 2001).

Pedagogy four: Report writing

Students in group HSC1 displayed low level of confidence with and preference for reports but indicated a high level of preference for essay writing. (HSC1): *"It's easier for me. I don't know why. Like in History I always topped my class with my essays same with Legal Studies"* Participants in group HSC2, HSC3 and TAFE/College1 shared similar preferences for report writing over an essay structure, claiming that their preferences for this activity stem from the fact that this style of writing is much more structured allowing them to incorporate the theories and concepts often required in business plans. (TAFE/College1): *I don't mind essay writing, just not for marketing or uni I guess it's because there are so much theories and frameworks that it's hard to put it into one long essay, the report helps break it up.*

Pedagogy five: Journal writing activity

As observed from the responses of participants, particularly those categorised as HSC1 and TAFE/College1, there appears to be a hesitation to engage in journal writing activities based

on the fact that there is often no definite right or wrong answer. For example: (HSC1): “... we have to do journal writing. I don’t like it I hate it because there is no right or wrong answer, what are you meant to write about?” In contrast, students in group HSC2 and HSC3 were able to recount a number of positive experiences with journal writing. Overall the factors that have made such experiences enjoyable for these groups are based on the opportunity to reflect on what they had learnt. They admit that such reflection is interesting and adds value to their learning experiences. (HSC3): “my experience with writing journals is that they force you to think to really reflect on what you’re doing and how it relates to each other” (HSC2): “I really liked it because you get to put in your own thoughts...”

Conclusion, Limitations and Future direction

This paper examined student preferences and experiences in differing teaching and learning pedagogies (TLPs) using students at various stages in their undergraduate marketing degree. In conducting a cross-case analysis over the three focus groups there appears to be an association between student preferences of class and assessment activities and their prior knowledge. Therefore, there needs to be different Pedagogies implemented for student learning as they transition through their undergraduate degree.

The research is limited by the relatively small sample size as there were only four participants within two of the focus groups. Furthermore, the volunteer sampling strategy employed for this study is recognised to be a limitation of this research. Further research could be undertaken to incorporate larger numbers such as a quantitative study for theory testing (Perry, 1998). There is possibility of conducting a longitudinal study so as to track student preferred TLP as they progress through their undergraduate marketing degree. Other disciplines in business could be explored such as accounting, management, economics and finance.

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