A Case Study on Experiential Learning for Marketing Students

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Abstract

This study explained the need for experiential learning required in marketing curriculum and provides an example of "learning by doing" project developed for the students enrolled in professional selling, advertising, and consumer behavior courses. As a result of this project, students may have a better understanding of marketing concepts. In this project, selected students were imparted practical entrepreneurial training ; whereas, students of various marketing courses like professional selling, advertising, and consumer behavior as part of their evaluative assignment applied the theoretical concepts in the real scenario.

Keywords: experiential learning, active learning, marketing, marketing curriculum, selling , advertising, consumer behavior

Historically, the concept of experiential learning is attributed to Socrates, who taught by asking questions and not by reciting answers. In modern times, the concept of active and experiential learning was first used by Dewey (1938), an American, who believed that the starting point of education is experience and not abstraction. The literature on active learning includes the descriptions similar to those of experiential learning (Frontczak, 1998). Kolb (1984) described experiential learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience. Active learning provides opportunities for students to talk, listen, read, write, and reflect through various interactive experiences (Meyers & Jones, 1993).

Eminent researchers and authors have highlighted the characteristics of active learning such as experience-based, reflection, high involvement, teacher as guide and facilitator (Drafke, Schoenbachler, & Gordon, 1996; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991 ; Tanner & Roberts, 1996). Active learning may also help in achieving a high level of learning objectives as per Bloom's taxonomy (Young & Hawes, 2013). One of the most famous and frequently used model of experiential learning was developed by David A. Kolb (Henry, 1989). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model suggests that learning occurs through a cyclical process that encompasses the following four stages, that is, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. One of the major advantages of experiential exercises is that they increase student learning by enhancing his/her involvement in the learning process (Morgan, Allen, Moore, Atkinson, & Snow, 1987 ; Slavin, 1980). An experiential exercise combines both discovery and involvement aspects to make it an effective educational tool (Goretsky, 1984).

Need for Experiential Learning in Marketing Education

Majority of the business schools are offering a basic course and specialization area of marketing in post-graduate business programs. Moreover, business schools have been accused of focusing too much on quantitative skills and

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give too little attention on interpersonal and communication skills (Louis, 1990 ; O'Reilly, 1994). Though quantitative and technical skills are considered important, yet the changing business environment demands communication, problem-solving, and team skills (Floyd & Gordon, 1998). Most of the students enrolled in the MBA course in India do not have a job or business experience. Indian business schools have been criticized for failing to prepare students for facing the challenges of a fast-changing corporate world (Dwivedi & Mahra, 2013 ; Singh, 2013).

While most of the faculty members support the general concept of some form of "active" learning, there has been only modest movement towards more active forms of learning (Watts & Becker, 2008). In business schools, the lecture method seems to capture the majority of class time (Lammers & Murphy, 2002; Watts & Becker, 2008). Business instructors spend too much time on information dissemination, and sufficient time is not devoted on developing students' skills (Chonko, 1993 ; Lamb Jr., Shipp, & Moncrief III, 1995; Ursic & Hegstrom, 1985). Traditional teacher dominated lecture is still the prevalent teaching style for marketing educators (Clow & Wachter, 1996 ; Roach, Johnston, & Hair, 1993). Power-point presentations have been reported to be the most frequently used teaching technology in marketing research classes (Wilson, Neeley, & Niedzwiecki, 2009). Some of the potential alternatives to the lecture method within marketing education include the case method, computer simulations, role playing, client-based service learning projects, internships, and other innovative approaches to hands-on learning (Young & Hawes, 2013). Despite so many alternatives available, students get most of their classroom instructions through lectures, passive form of learning, having poor results as compared to active teaching methods like role playing and experimentation (Wood, 2004). Moreover, college students prefer a more active form of learning than frequently used lecture methods (Davis, Misra, & Auken 2000). So, there is clearly a need for engaging active forms of learning within business, and especially in the marketing curriculum.

Relevance of Experiential Learning in the Marketing Curriculum

As per a study conducted by American Association of Higher Education, institutions should encourage active learning among students for creating learner-centered environment in higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Paradigm shift from "instruction paradigm" to a "learning paradigm" in higher education is suggested by some researchers (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Saunders, 1997). Instruction paradigm views instructors as deliverers of content, and students as passive recipients ; whereas, learning paradigm believes that instructors should be the designers of learning environment in which students are active participants in the learning experience (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, & Mayo, 2000).

According to various studies, marketing educators have shown interest and have adopted active and experiential approach in teaching (Harich, 1995 ; Lollar & Leigh, 1995; Stretch & Harp, 1991 ; Titus & Petroshius, 1993; Wright, Bitner, & Zeithmal, 1994). This kind of pedagogy has been considered as a major departure from traditional marketing education (Lamont & Friedman, 1997). According to Karns (2005), marketing educators should endeavor to increase the real-world applied connections in learning activities to enhance the student's perceived effectiveness of the learning activities.

While the need for active form of learning has already been established, marketing professors are reluctant to reduce the focus on lecturing and devote more time to other teaching/learning techniques (Csapo & Wilson, 2001; Graeff, 2010). An important reason for this is the substantially increased amount of time required as well as the difficulty in finding or developing appropriate alternatives to the classic lecture (Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996 ; Niemi, 2002 ; Pundak, Herscovitz, Shacham, & Wiser-Biton, 2009). Moreover, professors have to give up some control over the flow of information in the class and instead, guide the students who are co-producers in actively creating and presenting their own knowledge (Wright et al., 1994 ; Wright & Lovelock, 1999).

Thus, there is a great value in reporting various projects and methods for expanding a range of active learning approaches within the marketing curriculum (Neeley & Kenneth, 2010 ; Shaw, 2007). Creative experiential

activities have been proposed in different marketing courses such as retailing (Jones & Vignali, 1994; Stretch & Harp, 1991), professional selling (Castleberry, 1989 ; Lollar & Leigh, 1995; Macintosh,1995; Milner, 1995 ; O'Hara & Shaffer, 1995; Tanner Jr., & Castleberry, 1995; Wendell & Wynd, 1994), international marketing (Butler & Herbig, 1992; Johnson & Mader, 1992 ; Kamath & MacNab, 1998), advertising (Kelly, 1993), consumer behavior (Olsen, 1994; Rollbillard, 1990 ; Titus & Petroshius, 1993), distribution (Stock, Hughes, & Wahl, 1990), and services marketing (Ronchetto & Buckles, 1994). This list of experiential learning activities is indicative and not exhaustive, as it is outside the scope of this study.

This case-study describes an application of an active learning project for various marketing courses, that is, professional selling, advertising, and consumer behavior. This study was conducted among business students studying in an Indian B-school, where most of the students are admitted without job experience.

Experiential Learning Project

This experiential learning project involves three marketing courses: Professional selling, advertising, and consumer behavior. This project was executed during the months of May - December 2013. Although this project provides a different learning experience for each group of students, there are general learning objectives for all participating students. Some of these objectives are :

+ better understanding of marketing mix elements.

+ the opportunity to translate theoretical concepts into practice.

+ honing oral and written communication skills.

+ enhancement of team-building skills (except professional selling course).

This entrepreneurial project involves four phases as mentioned below :

(1) Phase I – Entrepreneurial Phase : An innovative entrepreneurial project involving experiential learning was designed for business students. Two MBA students, after a rigorous selection process, were selected and offered summer training by SML (Student organization of School of Business) under the mentorship of the faculty head of marketing domain. The overall objective of the entrepreneurial project was to reinforce the concepts introduced via textbooks through real-world opportunities and practice the acquired knowledge.

A brainstorming exercise was conducted to explore various business ideas that can be immediately implemented within the university campus. After rounds of discussion with faculty mentors, an idea of creating a discount coupon booklet was finalized. The idea of discount coupons of service providers inside and near the university campus seemed to be attractive as it could be marketed to approximately 30000 students and 2000 staff members on the campus. The idea was discussed with a few service providers on the campus so as to understand the feasibility and acceptance of the same. Service providers not only liked the idea, but also agreed to pay advertising fees for featuring their brands into the discount coupon booklet. After a lot of deliberations among the entrepreneurial team, the brand name 'Lavish Card' was finalized. A business proposal for service providers having the details of project, terms and conditions along with benefits was formulated. The students approached and presented the proposal to food, games and entertainment service providers inside and near the University campus. Finally, 15 service providers agreed to offer attractive discount offers exclusively for Lavish Card subscribers only. The exclusivity clause was formally signed and stamped by each associated service provider. Moreover, the advertising fee was charged from each service provider depending on the space and sequence offered in the Lavish Card. The advertising fee collected was used for designing and printing of coupons. A prototype of Lavish Card was created and a formal approval from each service provider was taken. A price of ₹ 199/- for each Lavish Card was finalized. Finally, the print order of Lavish Card was given to Mohindra Art
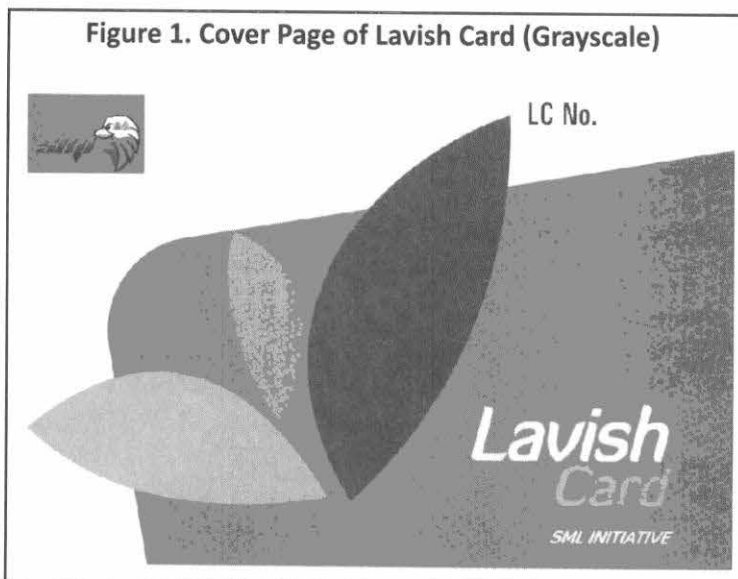
Figure 1. Cover Page of Lavish Card (Grayscale)

LC No.

Lavish
Card

SML INITIATIVE

Figure 2. Coupon of Water-Park in Lavish Card (Grayscale)

OFFER:- GET
50% OFF
ON EACH ENTRY PASS

OFFER:- GET
50% OFF
ON EACH ENTRY PASS

FOR MORE SUBSCRIPTIONS PLEASE CONTACT US AT
E-mail snlavish@gmail.com

OFFER:- GET
50% OFF
ON EACH ENTRY PASS

OFFER:- GET
50% OFF
ON EACH ENTRY PASS

OFFER:- GET
50% OFF
ON EACH ENTRY PASS

Designers and Printers (see Figures 1 and 2). Both students under the guidance of the faculty mentor submitted a detailed summer training report, sharing their experiences and challenges while executing the project. The students presented their work to business students and faculty members, discussing the importance and application of various business concepts/theories in practical live projects. Furthermore, the innovative entrepreneurial project was passed on to faculty and students of the professional selling course.

(2) Phase II – Selling Activity : Students enrolled in the professional selling course were taught the basic steps and concepts of selling in the first two weeks of the course. The learning objectives of professional selling course were to demonstrate the proficiency in basic steps of selling. During the third week of the course, faculty members shared a presentation with the students regarding a live project of promoting and selling the Lavish Card in the campus only. Students enrolled in the professional selling course assumed the role of a sales representative for the Lavish Card. For evaluation of the sales project, 70% weightage was given to the amount of sales generated ; whereas, 30% weightage was allocated to the report containing the sales strategy and selling process followed

during the sales, expressing their feelings, reactions, and emotions towards the experience. Some students presented and shared their experiences in the subsequent tutorial with their batchmates. After the sale, a student was required to fill the customer details on a form shared on Google drive ; 390 students sold 3983 Lavish Cards within a period of a fortnight, generating sales of ₹ 7.92 lakh. The revenue generated was distributed among the students, faculty, and SML. Next, the baton was passed onto the faculty and students of the advertising course so as to increase the redemption of coupons by the buyers of Lavish Card.

(3) Phase III – Advertising : Students enrolled in the advertising course were taught the basic concepts of the course in the first four weeks. The learning objectives of the advertising course were a) to apply basic advertising principles to practice, b) create socially responsible advertising strategies and campaigns. During the fifth week, faculty members shared the idea of a live project of advertising services and offers of a service provider (as part of the Lavish Card) on campus. The students were divided in 15 groups as per their choice. For deciding the service provider to be allocated to a group, an internal competition among the groups was finalized during the seventh week. Each group was required to make a presentation of an advertising plan for a service provider (an amusement park). Based on the performance of groups in the presentation, the service providers were allocated to each group during the eight weeks. Each group was given an advertising budget between ₹ 1000 to ₹ 5000 depending on the advertising fee contributed by the service provider in the Lavish Card. The advertising objective was to increase the coupon redemption of the allocated service provider. Customer data of Lavish Card was shared with the participating student groups. Depending on the attractiveness of the coupon, a basic redemption rate (automatic redemption without advertising) was finalized by faculty members after checking the initial response of the respective service providers. Due to limited advertising budget and time, the students designed various online advertisements, blogs, direct mailers, posters, and telemarketing campaigns for increasing the coupon redemption rate of the allocated service provider. All the groups shared and presented their creative advertisements, experiences, and application of theoretical concepts learnt in the course. Assessment of a live project was done on the basis of presentation on advertising plan, execution of campaign, and coupon redemption rate. Incentives were distributed to the groups depending on their overall assessment and performance.

(4) Phase IV - Consumer Research : Students registered in the consumer behavior course were taught the basic concepts in the first eight weeks. The learning objectives of the consumer behavior course were to (a) attain a thorough understanding of the mental processes that guide consumer perceptions, attitudes, memory, and choices, (b) understand the post-purchase behavior of consumers. During the eighth week, customer data of Lavish Card was shared with students of consumer behavior. The students were divided into 20 groups. Five groups conducted a survey on the post-purchase behavior of consumers towards Lavish Card ; whereas, the rest of the 15 groups conducted a survey on service quality of the allocated service providers. Standardized research instrument was used for collecting data on service quality. All the groups analyzed and interpreted the data and understood the consumers' insights towards service providers under the guidance of the faculty mentor. Assessment of each group was based on the presentation of the findings, insights, and recommendations of the study in front of their batch mates, faculty members, and service providers.

Implications for B-Schools

Majority of the Indian students take admission in MBA without any work experience. Moreover, Indian business schools recruit faculty members without industry experience because eligibility for the faculty position in India is clearing the UGC eligibility test only. Thus, the need for usage of experiential learning for business students in India is much more as compared to their peer groups in Western countries. The innovation presented in this study provides a useful example of how experiential learning can be implemented. This form of 'guided learning by

doing' can act as complementary to other pedagogies in accomplishing the learning outcomes of the marketing curriculum. As Indian academicians face difficulty in developing active learning projects, and lack of experience often hinders adoption of learning innovation, the description of this project can help marketing professors implement "learning by doing" project in combination with other pedagogy when teaching to business students.

Scope and Limitations of the Experiential Project

An important aspect of the project was that it helped in experiential learning for approximately 300 students and eight faculty members at one of the business schools in a university. Overall, this innovative approach for learning various concepts within the marketing curriculum is well accepted by the participating students and faculty members. Though implementing such a project has got its own advantages ; yet, there are certain challenges that need to be understood before implementation. The most significant positive aspect of this "learning by doing" project was that it helped the students in securing a final placement by giving them a story to share with prospective employers. It helped students in gaining the confidence and exposure to sales and marketing challenges in the industry. The relationship among students and the marketing professors improved a lot due to the regular interaction regarding the challenges of the project. According to a study, experiential learning activities encourage student-faculty contact and cooperation among students (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000). Moreover, a majority of the students had a positive feedback, leading to positive publicity and word of mouth for the business school.

One of the major challenges in implementing such a project in Indian B-schools is the mindset of the educational institutions and senior faculty members. Though majority of the B-schools in India follow the rules, regulations, and model curriculum developed by regulatory agencies such as AICTE and UGC ; yet, there is some scope of designing own student assignments by individual educational institutions or faculty members. It is difficult for some instructors to give up control of the class-room environment and redefine their role from "boss" to "coaches and facilitators"(Gremler et al., 2000). In particular, the amount of time devoted to the said project by marketing professors and students was very high as compared to traditional evaluation tasks like multiple-choice questions. In such projects, students spend more time as they shoulder more responsibility ; whereas, the instructor needs to evaluate the outcomes of experiential activities carefully by investing more time as compared to traditional means of assessing student assignments (Kohn, 1993). Thus, some other academic activities may be compromised by faculty and students for accomplishing this learning project on time. Marketing educators need to carefully place such activities in the curriculum so as to balance the overall load of students (Karns, 2005).

This experiential learning approach can be used in different marketing courses for different purposes. Similar kind of active learning project can easily be assigned in retailing, sales management, and services marketing courses with some modifications according to the learning objectives of the course. This model can easily be replicated by other business schools as it does not require a huge amount of financial resources. This kind of "hands on" training helps in professional development of marketing management students. This idea can stimulate some creative thoughts about "hands on" projects along with other pedagogies. Marketing educators need to develop experiential learning projects taking into consideration the learning objectives of the course, overall load of the students, and challenges in implementation of the same in their educational institutions. Business schools can support such initiatives by providing academic freedom and initial funding for such projects to faculty members and students.

Scope for Further Research

Going further, research on understanding the students' perceptions and willingness towards such experiential learning projects needs to be investigated. Moreover, the perspective of companies hiring students trained through

experiential learning projects can also be studied. A longitudinal study on students undergoing experiential learning projects will help in better understanding of this pedagogical approach.

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