Barriers to Deep Learning in Student Marketing Teams

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Abstract
This article reports on a qualitative study of marketing students working in teams over a single semester. The literature on higher education is introduced, and its focus on deep approaches to and outcomes of learning is emphasized. Findings provide descriptions of the struggle for control in student teams, the ineffective ways that social loafers are dealt with, the problems students experience in giving honest feedback to group members, and the possibilities for developing deep level understanding. Recommendations are made for teaching practice in marketing education.

Keywords: Marketing education, student teams, learning approaches, qualitative methods

1. Introduction
Hell is other people.  
(Jean-Paul Sartre, “No Exit,” 1949)

Co-operative teamwork among undergraduate and graduate students is increasingly common in marketing education. Research on this topic has been valuable in identifying problems that students experience, describing the ways that groups perform on various constructs of general interest and in recommending ways to help students overcome common team problems (see Batra et al. 1997). Yet, in order to further knowledge about the ways that students work in their groups, different questions should also be asked, and another research approach taken. We acknowledge that specialization, social loafing, and scheduling problems may all affect student performance and learning outcomes. Yet, one basic questions remains: what are the meanings of working in student teams? For example, how do students approach working in teams? What are their expectations? What do they really do while they are in the team, over the semester? How do they organize and perform their tasks? How do they feel about working in student teams? Critically, do students achieve a deeper understanding of course material from their engagement with team activity (see Marton et al. 1993, Ramsden 1992)?

This study proposes to examine students’ approaches to teamwork in marketing subjects in a very detailed, close, and systematic manner and in so doing, achieve a deeper, richer understanding of what it means to work in such a context. The following benefits are realized by such a study:

- A rich source of information has been obtained, describing the ways that students approach their collective project;
- Marketing educators will have the opportunity to understand what students think and feel about working in groups, what they do in them to complete tasks, and to consider recommended ways that facilitate and correct the processes and approaches involved.
- Problems that inhibit deep level learning outcomes (i.e., understanding and application of marketing concepts) are identified and explored.

2. Background Literature
It is widely recognized in the marketing education literature that using team projects as part of student evaluation may promote a critical set of support skills: teamwork, leadership skills, presentation skills, and so on (Bacon et al. 1998, 1999, McCorkle et al. 1999). Further, many lecturers teaching subjects in marketing make frequent use of team-based projects (e.g., Graeff 1997). Yet, despite the recognized value of students’ working groups solving practical marketing problems, there is considerable debate as to the ways that students benefit.
Moreover, there is growing concern that students may not realize the full experiential benefits of working in teams. For example, in a very recent study, McCorkle et al. (1999) argue that students “specialize” when dividing up the tasks for marketing assignments, and such delegation of responsibility may result in students not developing the full range of skills and understandings desired. Further, as one might expect, the “social loafing” phenomenon has been widely noted, and students themselves acknowledge that working in larger groups often leads to a lessening of effort among themselves or others in the group (Bacon et al. 1998, 1999, McCorkle et al. 1999). Further, social loafing is often expected and tolerated in student groups. Finally, the outcomes of peer evaluation — i.e., allowing students to evaluate each other’s performances and divide up the grade according to relative contribution and effort — may be mixed and unpredictable (Clark 1989, Conway et al. 1993, Goldfinch 1994). At best, peer evaluations may promote desirable and equitable grade outcomes; however, they do not necessarily guarantee learning outcomes for all marketing team members or motivate students to confront underperforming social loafers.

The key purposes of this article are (1) to introduce the usefulness and richness of perspective of the literature on higher education to the marketing education literature; and (2) to integrate higher education literature with original empirical findings from a study of marketing students working in teams. The literature on higher education, largely overlooked by past research in marketing education, has considerable potential to offer insights into learning outcomes and approaches to learning in a university setting. It is argued here that it is about time that these two academic discourses began “talking” to one another. Much research in higher education adopts a distinctly phenomenographic orientation. In other words, many works seek an understanding of learners’ own qualitatively distinct experiences of learning as they perform various tasks, attempt to grasp the meanings of pedagogical material (e.g., Dahlgren 1997, Laurillard 1993), and change their conceptions of subject material. As such, learning is explicitly conceptualized as the construction of and change in meaning at the emic, phenomenological level of the student himself or herself (see Marton 1992, Prosser and Trigwell 1999).

In this broad discourse about the ways that students learn, a central issue has emerged: the distinction between “surface” vs. “deep” approaches to and outcomes of learning. Deep approaches to learning require students to extract personal meaning from the situation (Biggs 1991, Laurillard 1993, Ramsden 1992, Van Rossum and Schenk 1984). In such learning contexts, students actively engage with material, focusing on the author’s central argument or point and relate new knowledge to previous knowledge and everyday experience. By contrast, surface approaches are far more superficial and less desirable. They involve students memorizing details, sentences, and “facts” without incorporating them into a relational schema or theoretical framework. Students who adopt a surface approach distort or fail to “get the point” of subject material, do not relate new concepts to existing knowledge, and do not attempt to contextualize these concepts in everyday life examples. Arguably, in this framework, we hope that our marketing students adopt deep approaches to learning so that they may achieve the deep learning outcome of understanding. As Ramsden (1992) asserts:

Deep approaches are connected with qualitatively superior outcomes which we associate with understanding a subject: the making of an argument, the novel application of a concept, an elegant solution to a design problem, an interplay between basic science knowledge and professional application, mastery of relevant detail, relating evidence correctly to conclusions (p. 61).

Deep approaches to learning and the following outcomes are associated with the application of concepts, understanding of material, viewing phenomena in different ways, and attaining change as a person (Marton et al. 1993). Students who employ deep approaches endeavor to construct personal meaning as related to the subject matter, rather than take the more strategic approach of seeking to pass examinations and other forms of assessment (Laurillard 1993). Further, previous work in the educational field has demonstrated that deep approaches to learning have some extremely interesting effects. Quite curiously and surprisingly, a few studies have argued that some students attain “expertlike” status as learners, and their applications of knowledge and solutions of problems closely resemble those of experienced experts in a given field (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993). Given that we commonly conceptualize expertise as a final stage after considerable practice, progression, and experience in a profession or field of endeavor, this phenomenon should not be observed! But it is. Such exceptional students are thought to forge their own personal learning agendas, progressively refining their competencies to match the task at hand, rather than the other way around.

In marketing education, it is arguable that the work assigned for group projects provides an almost ideal “testing ground” for the development of deeper under-
Understanding of marketing concepts and theory, given the practical and managerial bent of the field (e.g., Graeff 1997, Murphy 1998). Application of concepts and understanding of material is a must for business students, many of whom will ultimately assume intellectually demanding positions of responsibility in consulting, market research, advertising, or brand management. Students who perform marketing research studies, investigate industries, and advise small businesses must divide up and perform a series of complex tasks, find information, analyze data, interpret and evaluate data, and integrate findings (both qualitative and quantitative) into a coherent, informed, and useful management report. This type of work by its very demanding intellectual nature requires that students go well beyond the rote memorization skills that characterize surface approaches and outcomes and develop deeper research, analytical, interpretation, and writing skills. As such, we reasonably should expect that students advance their understandings of the marketing discipline when working in student teams on practical marketing assignments.

But is this necessarily so? The present study contributes to the marketing education literature by exploring the problems that marketing students experience in completing these assignments and advancing their own knowledge and skill. Theoretically, team projects should promote the development of complex understanding, the application of concepts, and perhaps even the achievement of expert-like status. As many marketing educators know almost instinctively, however, the dynamics of working in a team mitigate these desirable outcomes—and not necessarily for the better! This article provides us with insights of how and why this happens and what we can do for our students to promote desirable practical pedagogical outcomes of teamwork.

3. Method

Detailed and rich qualitative data are required in order to penetrate students’ “lifeworlds” as experienced in marketing work teams. The fundamental assumption of this phenomenological view of human experience is that human beings are inextricably related to the contexts in which they live and work (see Pollio et al. 1997 for a summary). Pragmatically, phenomenological, long in-depth interviews provide the best means of finding out about students’ experiences in teams (see McCracken 1988). During semester two in an undergraduate marketing program, six students were interviewed. These students came from three different kinds of work teams—a final year subject in Marketing Strategy, a final year subject in Marketing Research, and from a second year subject in Contemporary Retailing (with a minority of first-year students in it). The teams were working on industry analyses, market research reports, and retailing plans of actual retail businesses, respectively. It is also important to note that students were required to evaluate their peers’ performance at the end of the semester, dividing up the grade according to perceived quality and quantity of members’ performances. Specifically, students were asked to allocate one hundred points among all of the students in their groups—except themselves—hopefully reflecting a fair representation of effort and quality of work. Initial interviewing took place during the middle of the semester when students were at work on their projects. Second and final “debriefings” took place at the end of the term once the projects were completed. Further, students were asked to keep special “team diaries,” recording the detailed events occurring in their groups: meetings, work sessions, library visits, writing, etc. Overall, six students were interviewed, and all of them maintained journals over the semester. In addition, four more students maintained journals, in case some students dropped out of the study or if their data were unusable. Three students were male, three female, of those interviewed. Ages were between 19 and 24. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative (or interpretive) research does not rely on large samples for representativeness. Instead, it tries to provide ‘theoretical saturation’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in order to meet the goals of the research. In theory, I could have interviewed just one student if that would have been sufficient to discover the barriers to deep learning among students. As it turned out, six were sufficient, along with the meetings with the groups, and diaries to provide insights into the barriers to learning. McCracken (1988) recommends eight informants. Six informants, along with the other data, are sufficient to cast light on this context and provide insight into the investigation’s research objectives.

This study also adopts one other methodological technique common in the higher education literature: action research or providing explicit interventions of students’ work and drawing theoretical findings from it. Action research has a long and accepted tradition in various fields including nursing, education, and management (see Argyris 1993, Edmondson 1996). Action research seeks to improve practice in the real world by providing interventions from researchers or educators. Consistent with its interpretivist epistemology, it denies that there can be any separation between researchers and the phenomenon studied. As well as improving real-world
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4.1 The Struggle for Control

Potentially one of the most dysfunctional activities that may take place in students’ groups is the possibility that one or more students may “hijack” the work agenda, taking over the assignment but not performing satisfactorily:

Or another time when a member offered to do everything when the other members – another girl and myself – didn’t want this member to do everything. They took all the info and we kept asking them what they had done, and the day before it was due, we realized they hadn’t done anything. So there was a mad rush to get everything in on the very final day it was due. It was a bit hard…

Although previous literature has identified the problems in dealing with social loafers, it has not identified and
considered its associated problems and implications with equal attention (cf. McCorkle et al. 1999, Strong and Anderson 1990). The above student describes a situation in which another student lied about having performed work and temporarily deceived the other members, an ethical pitfall. It is particularly concerning, for not only does it obstruct the completion of the marketing tasks, but also, it effectively precludes any possibility for the development of deeper understanding of various key aspects of the course material. This student’s account raises another important but overlooked insight: working in a group is a highly ethical project, and there exist issues of personal and collective accountability. Such concerns are neither abstract nor academic: misrepresentation to group members, when it goes virtually unchallenged and unpunished in the context of student groups, gives tacit approval to unethical acts and further wrongdoing. Such students may be unaware that working in a group requires a basic deontological duty of care and an assumption of a social contract among members (see Dunfee et al. 1999).

Other manifestations of the struggle for control are relatively less serious:

...it was last year so it was quite recent. We had six people in [the group]. And there was a guy in it who wanted to dictate every single thing...we relied on him...So it ended up...there was a lot of tension there between him and the rest of us. But we never said anything. (m 24, interview data)

I won’t like to work with — again...he talks too much, is independent and opinionated which is not a bad thing, but it will be difficult for group cohesiveness as he wants his own way all the time. (f 21, diary entry).

...the problem with that guy is...I’m not sure, I think he likes to hear his own voice. He has to sound like he knows a lot, because he doesn’t. We’ve only had him in the group for a couple of weeks, and we haven’t sat him down and discussed just what we were actually doing. He pretty much shat on everything we did and we told him it was no good without giving us any input of his own. And none of the group like him. (f 22, interview data).

Usually, struggles for control manifest in everyday group interaction with some members attempting to dominate conversation and others resenting it. Such perceived breaches of group etiquette usually go on unhindered, and the majority of the informants expressed a strong reluctance to confront others. One informant noted that although she would like to be friends with all of her present group members (she liked them personally), she would not prefer to work with a certain male member in her group because she found him “opinionated” and “independent.” Yet, this same male member was also interviewed for the study and (without knowing what this fellow group member thought about him) expressed a sincere desire to “get the conversation rolling” by talking himself. This yields the finding that some students enter groups with a strong desire to contribute and engage with other students, but may not have the sensitivity to gauge that other students may perceive their enthusiasm (and even their willingness to engage with others) as intimidating and off-putting. At the same time, those who complain of others’ efforts to “dominate” the group process may be misinterpreting the laudatory intentions of these behaviors. Overall, misunderstandings may abound among group members, and may subsequently promote and inspire a struggle for control.

To compound students’ difficulties, most informants stated a strong reluctance to openly confront members with their negative feelings toward such behaviors. This seems to be indicative of a more widespread group norm of not taking the time to address proactively group process and dynamics along with task demands. Unfortunately, the most expedient solution to these types of problems seems to be capitulation:

She [a group member] wouldn’t work here at the [university] Her father’s rich as...three computers at home. I felt uncomfortable working there, for starters. Everything I wrote, she changed. I was never right. She was always right. Her father would always proofread and would always take her side. We would get the lecturer’s opinion, and then she would take her father’s opinion over the lecturer’s opinion. That was extremely infuriating. But in the end, I just changed the way I worked and did what she wanted me to do, because I couldn’t get her to take my point of view or input without changing it around to her point of view. (m 22, interview data).

The facts of the situation outlined above are impossible to verify because the other student in question has not been interviewed. What is more relevant, however, is that these pervasive perceptions of “controlling behavior” by certain students exist and are allowed to persist for the entire semester without any attempt to seriously and effectively address them. Further, an opportunity for deeper learning is missed here, for students, by addressing such group issues, may begin to embody skills such as negotiation, compromise, and effective communication.

Underlying this struggle for control by group members is
fear of being disappointed by them and then being held accountable for their work:

I hate relying on other people. Why it didn’t work out is...well, for group assignments, I was let down by tutorial group members in an assignment. I was disappointed the way they worded their part of the assignment and the assumption. It was unfair to the rest of the group. I was let out by the way they didn’t care. And in true life, you get let down by other people. It’s just better to do it myself rather than be let down by other people. (f 22, diary entry).

That’s the problem I have with working in groups. So many times group members have said they’ll do something, and they end up not even attempting the task (m 24, diary entry).

Yet, paradoxically, deeper understanding did develop from the following manifestation of conflict in a particular group, when certain members attempted to “work around” this conundrum:

It was a marketing plan part of the entire assignment. They [another group member] had things mistaken in terms of promotion and budgeting. They were overbudgeting for a smaller business that couldn’t afford certain advertising expenses...their part was just to outline the marketing plan and what they would think of what this business should do. That was their part of the plan. [I: What do you do with work that you disagree with or is really bad like that?] We told them what was wrong with it. But they wouldn’t listen to us and wouldn’t let us change it. So we worked around that person, got together secretly so they didn’t see that part of the final report, and we ended up handing it in. We had the majority and we didn’t want to be penalized because of that person’s misinformation...When we got it handed back, they really weren’t too pleased with it, but we just told them that we probably would have gotten a worse mark if they handed it in. And we talked to the tutor about it and he said we did the right thing. (f 20, diary entry).

In the above passage, the struggle for control over the contents of the final report entailed both a deeper understanding of the position of the business and even critical thinking. In order to avoid the probable negative outcome of an ostensibly flawed report, the majority of students covertly arranged for a rewrite. What is particularly interesting here (aside from the ethics of the situation) is that the conflict was not resolved openly and that the majority of students, while arguing their point and engaging in debate, felt they had to avoid further open conflict and resolved the issue “privately.”

4.2 Dealing with Freeloaders/Social Loafers

The following passages from two students are fairly typical of the other students interviewed, when discussing the ways that underperforming group members are dealt with:

They just played around, on the Internet, when we were in discussion. Played with their mobile phones and just basically were there but weren’t there at all. Didn’t really contribute. We gave them projects, but sure enough, they did them half heartedly...I don’t think they looked at it and address the purpose of the assignment and assess why they were doing what they were doing, Do the formulas and that’s it. With one guy, I said something to him, and he just kind of laughed it off. It got to the stage where the assignment was so damn big, I just thought, “let’s do it.” Three of us. We just did the assignment. When we handed it in, I sat them down and said, “I had to do all of your work.” They said, “which parts?” “All of it, redoing all your stuff.” I told them it wasn’t much fun having them in the group and I didn’t think it was fair. [I: Did you have the option of failing them?] No. We had the option...we wrote who did what. But we didn’t have a rating system. It was just pretty much who did what and when. I did mine, and all of the other group members did theirs. I know that the teacher would have read them but...No, I don’t feel bad about that at all because in the long run, when they get out of [university] they’ll have to find a job. I don’t really care whether they’re not working in the group because these are the kind of people I will have to go up against to get a job, right? And if they’re not working hard in uni, and they don’t know what they’re talking about, I’ll get a job and I won’t have to worry about them. (f 22, interview dat).

...in the end, I’m competing with that person in the business world. ... I’m not here to wipe someone else’s nose. I’m here to look after myself and to help other people if they want to help themselves. In the end, it’s going to be me against them in the marketplace. So hopefully I’ll get the job over them. (m 22, interview data).

Again, students display the strong unwillingness to address group dynamic issues (such as social loafing) during the semester. Their focus is entirely task oriented, perhaps due to the time pressures of multiple deadlines. Instead, students adopt strategies of “working around” social loafers. Informants reported that they fully expected some students to loaf. They also noted instances of doing others’ work when disappointed and even organizing meetings without informing underperforming group members. (Social loafing is largely a matter of perception...
of the nature of the task, the quality of performance, and the ways a task must be done. Quite understandably, the majority of informants claimed that they did not engage in this practice themselves, and they supported this claim with evidence of the tasks they performed in present and past groups. Additionally, I verified some of the claims by comparing the quality of group work with their independent assignments and midterms for these exams.

What is perhaps even more illuminating is the common rationalization that students give for not confronting social loafers: that social loafers do not learn and will not succeed in the job market. Although this last point’s veracity is somewhat debatable, it points to an important impediment to deeper understanding that occurs in student teams. Those students who loaf get no opportunity to develop understanding of course material. Further, the students who do (or redo) their work may not deepen or broaden their understanding due to the time pressures from immediate deadlines (cf. Williams et al. 1991). Finally, permitting this type of behaviour may reinforce and perpetuate dysfunctional norms in the context of a business school community.

The following quote nicely summarizes these students’ dilemma:

...every week, he said, “I’ve got really good stuff this week, doing this and that.” When it came to that, all he brought in was all the cutouts from the journal articles. This is the lit review. And we said, “no. The lit review is actually reading through it and coming up with some points.” So that screwed that around, and we had to redo that process. [I: The rest of the group did it? What do you do then?] You accept the fact that you’re not going to get anything. And you just scrap it...they’re not keen. Or they’ve got no idea or they’re willing to put in the extra work, and you take the extra load because you’re willing to do that to get a better mark. [I: What do you do with people who don’t make a significant contribution?] Nothing. I used to get really pissed off. But nothing is said. You usually say, “thanks but no thanks, but we’ll finish it.” Do I have to come to the meeting? No. [I: Why?] Because all you’ve basically done is plagiarized other people’s work and given no original thought to it. To avoid the conflict, the actual fact that having to say to someone, “you’ve done nothing.” To stay away from that. (m 22, interview data).

The above passage effectively summarizes students’ orientation to completing the task at hand and avoiding any kind of open interpersonal conflict in team projects. First, it reflects students’ belief that loafing is inevitable. Further, the task becomes a thoroughly instrumental exercise, and social loafing is a challenge to be avoided and “worked around,” not constructively confronted and successfully overcome (see Strong and Anderson 1990). It also illustrates the inattention to group process issues and the missed opportunities for deepening skills such as interpersonal communication and co-operation.

It should be noted that none of the students interviewed or who provided diaries admitted to loafing – except one. This informant admitted that she was not as involved in the project as she would like, for she was very busy that semester, her last one. She strategically decided that it was overall better for her to accept a lower grade during the evaluation phase than spend more time on the project, given her workload. Thus, the means of splitting up the grade according to effort may not ensure that students achieve deep learning from a particular project, if they are willing to suffer moderate consequences.

4.3 Giving Criticism and the Learning of Skills

Despite some very real problems working in groups, there is evidence that students do acquire skills and deepen their knowledge about various marketing concepts while working in a group setting:

In first year, in Marketing Management [i.e., the Introduction to Marketing course], working on marketing plans. We had to do five assignments. It was a bit helpful because some people knew how to do marketing plans already and whereas some of us didn’t know how to do it at all. Which was helpful. We learned how to organize it and about product lifecycle, and some people knew about that. And how to set it up. How to use various info databases. We had to use...databases for an assignment, and I didn’t know how to use it, but the other member of my group did, so he showed me how to use it. So it was helpful. (f 20, interview data).

I’ve learnt most...a lot out of this current assignment for [Marketing Research]. How to ask questions. I think I will...I’ll learn how to ask something exactly and correctly. And how to do a survey...We don’t argue about questions. It’s more like a debate about questions, the wording. The specific wording. We’re trying to determine satisfaction with food and meals at a food outlet. Meals...do we say meals, dinner, or food? We had a debate over the question ‘where do you purchase most of your food on campus? Should it be food? Meals? Dinner?’ We had debates over that. [I: Which one did you choose?] It varied. It was food or dinner or both. Snacks as well. (m 24, interview data).
As one might expect, groups are sometimes the sites for the direct transmission of skills and knowledge. In the first passage above, a female student relates the ways her group shared knowledge and the way some members instructed others on the use of particular databases. In contrast, in the second passage, another student describes the more problematic “debate” about the wording and structure of a marketing research questionnaire. According to this informant, debates were socially risky occurrences (and consequently, were to be avoided) for they introduce the possibility of dysfunctional conflict and “lack of synergy” into the group’s dynamic. Below, he elaborates:

*I learnt this semester...Don’t argue with other group members, because it never improves the situation. I argued with one member of my other group about how his written analysis was so bad! I thought he was joking when he handed me such a shitty write-up. After that argument, he pretty much doesn’t like me. By me trying to tell him what he’d done wrong, he took it as offence, when all I was trying to do was teach the guy how to write proper assignments! (He’s only 19 years old.) What I said to him was actually an experiment - to determine his reaction - something I needed to know, perhaps for the future. Therefore, rather than argue, I debated with members of my group, bringing humour into it. It works. (m 24, diary entry).

Learning and taking explicit instruction from others in the context of groups is a socially threatening undertaking. Although some students are eager to master certain skills and disciplines, others appear reluctant to have the quality of their work or their ideas constructively critiqued by others. Some students simply did not view group members’ criticism as opportunities to correct misconceptions about course content and deepen their understanding of marketing. Thus, creative possibilities for deeper understanding and critical thinking may be curtailed. Along the same lines, productive debate in which group members openly disagree is viewed as dysfunctional conflict — annoying at best, destructive at worst — but not as productive, generative, and potentially creative tension. However, debate and reconciliation of differences are also golden opportunities for students to deepen understanding.

Nonetheless, the group leader quoted above found a way to put a positive spin on conflict, interjecting humour into the situation, building a rapport among members:

*Fortunately, all group members had a sense of humour. As we got to know each other, we were able to make jokes of one another. Humour also extended into a lot of other topics. Because we all knew each other, a joke could be said anytime, no matter what we were doing. If I felt there needed to be something funny to be said to ease the situation, then away I’d go...A lot of the humour occurred naturally. I am always saying funny things. Perhaps the jokes were always ‘flying’ because we felt like friends. (m 24, diary entry).

Interestingly, the above informant had complained that his group — originally strangers to one another — was quiet and uncommunicative during the beginning of the semester. He also found it unfair that he felt obligated to begin discussions and initiate tasks. Yet, over the semester, the group began to “feel like friends” and were able to communicate in both a candid and good-natured way to one another — even about problems with the work. However, among informants’ reports, this approach is unique, for some groups do not arrive at such a level of familiarity and comfort. Other informants reported incidents of either “hanging back” (i.e., not giving constructive criticism or providing ideas during meetings) or being annoyed by “opinionated” group members who actually did break the unspoken norm of keeping the peace.

4.4 The Possibility for Deeper Understanding of Marketing Concepts

Yet, in spite of these several problems, the possibility for deep level learning in students’ groups does exist. During an interview with one first year group member and a meeting with his group, the following group learning situation was discussed:

…we did a positioning graph of where everybody is, high price, high quality, high service, and we were distinguishing where each bike shop is. But also, a lot of the stores...are very high in service and very high in price...whereas this shop is extremely high service, medium price, and they’re basically all by themselves which we think is why they’re so successful. (m 19, interview data).

Later during the personal interview and a following group meeting, the students in the group discussed the implications of this unique positioning for both competitive threats and a potentially expanded trading area of the store. In so doing, some of the students exhibited one of the key elements of deeper understanding: its relational character in linking important concepts – and prior and new discoveries - together into a coherent, logical narrative (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993, Biggs 1991, Dahlgren 1997, Marton and Säljö 1997, Ramsden 1992,
Svensson 1997). Two group members had investigated the bicycle store together and were in the process of transforming first-order, commonsensical, experiential knowledge (i.e., “people will travel longer to get to a better bike store”) into a more discursive and abstract theoretical understanding of the retailing scenario (i.e., “the store’s unique positioning may motivate consumers to travel further specifically to the bike store, and this implies we should develop a larger trading area with our proposed marketing tactics”). Such an abstract formulation is useful and complex, for it promotes relational thinking and understanding; it also reflects students’ understanding that positioning and marketing mix elements should be congruent. In action research terms, the meeting I held with students was an intervention. It consisted of asking them questions about their project, discovering the problems and successes, and then providing them with constructive feedback about their approaches to the tasks and their interim outcomes.

However (and most perplexingly), despite the students’ understanding of the relationship between the store’s unique positioning and the implications for developing the trading area and other important marketing mix elements (which they discussed during interviews), these crucial points were not written up in the group’s final report. This failed learning outcome seems sharply contrary to the progress the group was making earlier during the semester. Debriefing interviews yielded the following possible explanations. First, the group began to “fall apart” during the last few weeks when many of the members were unable to meet for some crucial meetings and participate fully in the writing of the final report. This was further confirmed by the awarding of two members higher grades through the peer review system. The writing of the final report fell largely to two particular students in the group. Second, it appears that the two students in question – both in first year – did not understand the educational value or managerial relevance of explicitly connecting marketing concepts (and prior and new knowledge) within the context of writing a practical, managerially focused final report. In other words, there was no important and significant relational link made between first order, tangible experience (i.e., the facts of the retailing scenario) and the second order, abstract conceptualizations (i.e., a unique positioning that fits with pricing, store location, etc.) that marketing education seeks to develop in students (see Prosser and Trigwell 1999, Svensson 1997). Thus, the students “missed the point” in the end. From my own perspective, the interventions I provided were ineffective. Reflecting on how I could have improved my own practice, I believe that I should have repeated the advice about deep versus surface learning approaches and outcomes with the group and the class, asking them repeatedly and explicitly to provide me with written examples of surface and deep instances, in writing, throughout the semester.

5. Discussion: Student Groups and Implications for Teaching Practice

Failure is often instructive. This paper offers a significant contribution to marketing education theory and practice by identifying the context specific problems that marketing students experience in developing deeper understanding of material when they work in teams. Despite the very real potential that deeper understanding can develop when students work together, this potential may go unrealized. First, some of the students studied in this investigation engaged in an unacknowledged struggle for control of the group and its tasks, particularly in light of the fact that they are being held responsible for the work of other students. Second, students are often reluctant to engage in any open form of confrontation in groups, and this reluctance may result in the ineffective treatment of social loafers and the non-communication of honest feedback and criticism of others’ work. Finally, students may not explicitly recognize the value and relevance of abstract marketing concepts to the solution of their more tangibly focused marketing problems.

5.1 Overall Interpretations of the Data

One interpretation is that these problems, when they occur, appear to be a combination of dysfunctional team norms developing early on during the semester or carried over among different semesters. However, another interpretation is that students never really undergo a full and effective “storming” stage of group development (see McShane 1995, Tuckman and Jensen 1997). Too apprehensive and reluctant to disturb “group cohesiveness” or “synergy” (or more likely, the illusion that the group is harmonious and conflict free), students may not openly confront each other about problems and differing goals while establishing positive norms that will guide future interactions and work related activities.

There is another viable interpretation of this data. During the semester, the team project is framed as arduous work, instrumental in achieving a grade (i.e., a tangible, desired goal), but not as for learning in itself or the necessary background and practice for a future job. Students’ time horizons become shortened, particularly in light of pressures from other subjects, disagreeable team members, and nearing deadlines. Thus, the intrinsic interest in the
project as a learning experience wanes (if it was ever there in first place), and an expedient surface approach to learning adopted – the “dumping” of facts of a project without the necessary relational and critical thought or analysis performed (see Svensson 1997).

5.2 Implications for Teaching Practice in Marketing

This study has implications for teaching marketing, and certain helpful exercises are suggested.

- One of the key findings is that students engage in an unarticulated struggle for control over group tasks and processes, and this problem must be addressed. For the most part, participants in this study indicated an unwillingness to address interpersonal problems and group dynamics. During class time, it may be very helpful for marketing educators to introduce the topic of group dynamics and inform students of the common problems that occur and the ways they can be resolved. In particular, students should be informed that misunderstandings and fear of being held accountable for the work of others may result in dysfunctional conflict that must be proactively addressed. Certain “stereotypes” of group behaviours may be humorously explored in such discussions: “the silent type,” “the control freak,” “the loudmouth” etc. Students must be informed that all groups have problems, and such problematic behaviours are not necessarily indicative of unwillingness to work or of an intention to control the group. Conflict should be introduced as a normal occurrence in groups, not something to be actively avoided. Indeed, conflict may be presented as a positive, constructive phenomenon that gets students thinking about objectives and tasks, not as a negative, destructive thing. Indeed, it can be stressed that conflict in interpersonal situations can lead to the deepening of relationships and the positive facilitation of a worthwhile goal.

- Lecturers may choose to incorporate a component of the grade for group process concerns. Students may be given deadlines for progress reports during the semester and asked to detail team projects that have arisen and the ways that they were constructively handled (see Batra et al. 1997). Marks may be allocated for innovative, constructive solutions to team conflicts as described in interim progress reports. This suggestion is related to the finding that implicit struggles for control occur among students, along with a failure to expose and discipline social loafers. Ongoing grades related to process may have the effect of exposing loafers and ‘control freaks,’ modifying their behaviours. This ongoing monitoring may also have the effect of modifying the involvement and productivity of ‘strategic loafers’ who do enough work to pass, but do less than their fellow team members. If the penalty is high enough, and if the workings of the group are exposed on an ongoing fashion, these loafers may decide that the grade and social consequences are not worth the risks.

- Detailed assignment descriptions that include suggested headings and subheadings (cf. Batra et al. 1997) are a useful means of communicating assignment objectives and requirements. Yet, at the same time, students may be tempted to simply “slot in” data under these headings, adopting a surface approach to the project, leaving topics unconnected (e.g. positioning as it affects advertising objectives and tactics, etc. in a marketing plan). Caution must be exercised in providing “grids” or “templates” for student use, for the assignment may be transformed into a simple “cut and paste” exercise. This suggestion is linked to students’ tendency to reduce assignments to simple surface learning exercises (e.g., with little application, theoretical knowledge development, but much ‘dumping’ of facts). Group reports may explicitly request instances of deep learning approaches and outcomes, and students’ explanations of these examples.

- “Seeing” marketing concepts in real life business practice (i.e, abstracting from concrete, tangible experience or actual contexts), applying concepts, and relevantly connecting marketing concepts are key aspects of deeper understanding and learning the marketing discipline. Yet, in the present study, students experienced difficulty in abstracting from actual contexts and writing a report that reflected this relational, theoretical understanding. Undergraduate students, as beginning learners in the university environment, bring preconceptions to learning that may not serve them well (Laurillard 1993). One of these preconceptions is that university learning consists of first-order experience, leading them to believe that marketing is just “good common sense.” Lecturers may wish to emphasize understanding and relational thinking in applying marketing concepts; students may be explicitly informed that marketing concepts (such as positioning, pricing theory, etc.) must be explicitly employed in reports and connected in relevant ways. Further, instructors may wish to encourage reflection and “metacognition” (i.e., thinking about thinking) and make the process of deepening understanding more transparent and explicit.
As one informant demonstrated, developing a rapport with group members—sometimes through the use of humour—plays an instrumental and valuable role in establishing familiarity and candidness in student groups. It may be socially risky and uncomfortable to criticize a stranger’s work or performance, but “friends” (even temporary ones, as characterizes many relationships in business school) cut some slack for one another. Early in the semester, lecturers and tutors may conduct exercises that allow students to “break the ice,” helping strangers build rapport. Laughter appears to be a great equalizer, and during tense periods as deadlines loom ahead, students may require a continuing source of goodwill that humour can sustain.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented findings from an original qualitative study of students’ perception of working in marketing teams. Deeper understanding and application of marketing concepts and theory are worthwhile goals in marketing education. Yet, these objectives are impeded by teams’ problems. By explicitly addressing the goal of achieving deeper understanding and the related dynamics of groups, it is hoped that marketing educators may assist their students in getting the greatest benefit from team projects.

The higher education literature suggests much productive further research on student teams. For example, what specific pedagogical techniques are most effective in promoting deep approaches to and outcomes of learning? Are certain techniques more appropriate for first year undergraduate students versus senior year students? Are certain marketing concepts best learned and applied in teams or by individual learners? Future research in marketing education may be enriched and furthered by addressing these kinds of questions and by a phenomenographic perspective.

References


Biography

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