Fostering Critical Thinking in Business Courses: Pedagogical Innovations and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

One of the key challenges facing business school educators in teaching at colleges and universities with large populations of minority and first generation college students is fostering critical thinking. This paper documents a number of pedagogical innovations and strategies for motivating students to read and reflect on their textbooks, scan their environment as consumers, and document and reflect on a course’s major theories and concepts in the context of their own experiences as consumers. Students are encouraged to use the WISE approach, that is, to wonder about, investigate, speculate, and evaluate theories, concepts and their own experiences. These strategies were specifically geared at increasing student interest, involvement, technology use, learning, and critical thinking. An exploratory look at the effectiveness of these innovations is provided through an examination of student assignments, results of in-depth interviews with students, and an examination of the course evaluations. Three strategies that received excellent feedback were the use of: poetry in the form of “brandomes” to summarize the essence of brands; online psychographic segmentation that gave students a first hand experience of being categorized, and engendered a lot of questioning; and short movies, to discuss branding and promotions. These strategies met with success in improving interest, involvement, technology use, learning, and critical thinking in the context of introductory marketing classes but have relevance for other undergraduate business courses.

Keywords
Undergraduate business education, critical thinking, pedagogical strategies, WISE, marketing education, diversity

Impetus

The genesis of this paper is a professional struggle that the author faced when she moved from teaching in what might be characterized as privileged environments to teaching at a major urban university that is one of the most diverse in the nation. Rather than being a segue, it turned out to be a discontinuous change in learning environment. Several challenges hitherto not experienced included students being completely disengaged, acknowledging that they do not read the assigned text and materials, and reluctance to do any written work, whether in-class or out. While these challenges were widespread in the upper division courses, they seemed to be at their worst in the introductory classes. Several characteristics of the university environment and student body are pertinent to understanding the challenges of motivating student interest, involvement, learning, and development of critical thinking. First, the university is a comprehensive public urban institution located in a major metropolitan area. Second, the majority of students come from the lower income communities within a ten-mile radius of the campus. Third, there is considerable age and ethnic diversity. The ethnic diversity of the campus at the time of the study is reflected in a student population that is 35% Hispanic, 31% African-American, 10% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 23% White compared to proportions in the U.S. population of 13%, 13%, 4% and 74% respectively. (www.cssud.edu/ori; www.census.gov Census 2000 Summary File (SF 1)), gaining the university a ranking from the U.S. News and World Report of the most diverse in the Western U.S for three consecutive years. Related to the above, the university caters to a large number of first-generation Americans and first generation college students in its service area. Finally, the university suffers from poor faculty morale and a historically weak institutional image with better students self-selecting other options for their college education (Smith 2002).

As a cumulative consequence of these characteristics, major challenges for the university are under-prepared students and poor student success rates as measured by retention and graduation data (Smith 2002). The perception that academic standards and faculty expectations of students have been in a state of decline created a vicious cycle in which writing played a progressively smaller role in courses, and students who enroll (in a course/degree program) expect to pass/get their degrees with little effort. In-depth interviews with students over a course of two years revealed that they would not read the text (and often did not purchase it nor use the desk copy at the library), had a preference for standardized, multiple-choice questions in testing, and disliked all assignments involving any reading or writing. Faulty assumptions about the effort involved in completing higher education requirements, coupled with life realities such as single parenting, caring for elders, working full time and holding multiple jobs while going to university result in a tendency to wrongly view the degree-granting role of higher
education as the enabling factor in upward and lateral mobility in the workforce. This undermines the importance of viewing higher education as a means of learning, thinking and knowledge acquisition that in turn are instrumental in career mobility.

The educator’s teaching evolved in response to these challenges. Confronted with a student body and educational environment that challenged her previous experiences and beliefs about student motivations and aspirations, she reflected on the questions: How do we motivate students to develop an interest in and involvement with marketing as a subject matter? How do we give them opportunities to use technology within the context of introductory marketing courses? How do we foster an understanding that marketing is now grounded in solid theoretical, conceptual, and empirical bases? Taking ideas from the Enhancing Critical Literacy Project at the University based on a Title V grant for Hispanic serving institutions, the author developed several pedagogical innovations and strategies to enhance critical thinking in marketing. These approaches require students to document and reflect on the course’s major theories and concepts in the context of their own experiences as consumers.

Outline

This paper provides a working definition of critical thinking as relevant to marketing educators. Students are encouraged to use the WISE approach, that is, to wonder about, investigate, speculate, and evaluate theories, concepts and their own experiences (Ruggiero 2003). It then provides a description of the innovations and strategies that are expected to assist marketing educators in increasing the effectiveness of their teaching. Finally, it provides an exploratory look at the effectiveness of these innovations through an examination of student assignments, results of in-depth interviews with students, and an examination of the course evaluations.

Challenges for Undergraduate Marketing Educators

The challenge for educators in undergraduate programs especially in introductory courses is tri-fold. One, it is easy for students to fall prey to the idea that they already know everything there is to know about marketing as it is all common sense and easy. Marketing is after all the most visible and omnipresent aspect of business and within the daily experience of most people. Hence, of all the courses a student has to complete, marketing, particularly the introductory marketing course is expected to be the boondoggle--the easiest in terms of content and workload. When these notions of marketing are coupled with the characteristics of the student body and educational environment described above, it becomes necessary to motivate student interest in the subject as a legitimate business function, academic discipline and field of inquiry with theoretical bases and practical implications of its own. With businesses becoming less functional in their approach to marketing and marketing becoming more prevalent in all aspects of business, everyone is teaching marketing these days (Heckman 1999). Courses that should be taught as part of marketing curricula such as customer service, database marketing, and e-marketing are often offered in information systems departments where they are not necessarily tied closely to marketing theory and may be more technical. Recently, research on preventing marketing from becoming marginalized and giving marketing legitimacy in business argues that marketing needs to become more accountable. For this to happen, the integration of marketing theory and practice is a high priority and we must ask the question “how do we improve marketing education?” (Baker and Holt 2004, p. 564).

Two, in an environment in which experience is valued most by students, they expect introductory courses to test them in their ability to regurgitate material, preferably in closed-ended, dual (True/False) or multiple choice formats. Even short-answer questions are expected to be repetition of definitions, rather than application. There is a large breadth of material that must be covered in introductory courses, which again tilts the scale in favour of such traditional methods of teaching and assessment. However, business employers do not simply look for students who have a textbook based knowledge of marketing. Instead they value students with particular abilities such as oral and written communications, creativity, listening, problem solving, and decision-making. The “preparation gap” between skills required by recruiters and those that undergraduate marketing students have has been documented and recommendations made on preparing students better for the real world with inclusion of experiential elements whenever possible (McDaniel and White 1993). Summarizing a large body of research, communications skills are systematically evaluated at the top of the list of employer-desired skills for marketing majors (Young and Murphy 2003). While general education courses and stand-alone business communications courses are supposed to provide students with necessary communications skills, it is imperative that marketing students recognize the fundamental importance of such skills to their success, and integrate communications and marketing content seamlessly. Thus it is necessary to cultivate these abilities within marketing courses. Interest, involvement, and practical learning may
be increased by including in the course design experiential techniques such as case analysis and presentation, and marketing analyses of brands of interest and relevance to the students (Peterson 1996).

Three, and perhaps the most difficult to overcome, is a widespread hesitation to express and defend one's own arguments, to questions ideas presented in textual or lecture materials, and to critically evaluate peers' arguments. Again, providing opportunities for developing and sharpening such critical thinking skills prepares students better for the world of business than courses that are more traditional in design. In the broad educational environment described above, these opportunities must be in the form of regular, manageable activities throughout the course, rather than or in addition to a semester project. It has been suggested that marketing education move from a traditional 4Ps approach to a more "activity-based marketing," focusing on marketing as a process (Haire et al., 2001). Providing students with a number of manageable activities with short time horizons and multiple deadlines has the added benefit of training students for the world of business where ongoing deadlines, accountability and responsible team work are the bottom line.

Critical Thinking
Thinking has three dimensions—reflective, creative, and critical (Ruggiero 2003). Reflective thinking involves identifying challenges and opportunities and deepening our understanding of our experiences. In childhood, this is through the constant questioning derived from curiosity, and as one matures, through cultivating the habit of reflecting on daily experiences. The creative dimension involves generating ideas to solve problems and resolve issues, including identifying as many ideas as possible through techniques such as brainstorming, analogy, and visualization. Critical thinking is the third dimension and involves evaluating ideas (including those of others and one's own) and identifying the best ones. It includes developing the ability to separate fact from opinion, recognizing reasoning errors, analyzing arguments, and making ethical judgments (Ruggiero 2003). All three dimensions of thinking are relevant to marketing education; as such we will use the term critical thinking in a broader sense to include reflective and creative thinking. Critical thinking is much narrower than but an essential component of critical literacy which is "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine 1982). In the inter-disciplinary context of marketing, one might view critical literacy as the ability to understand and use words and language to define oneself and the marketing world in which we live.

The WISE Approach
Few people think more than two or three times a year. I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

With the premise that a thoughtful and sentient student is desirable, the author adopted the WISE approach in the introductory marketing class (Ruggiero 2003). Using this approach, students were asked to wonder about marketing phenomena in their daily lives, to speculate about a number of different ways of thinking about the marketing problems and issues, including generating a number of solution alternatives for decisions, and to evaluate the alternatives, select the best one, and defend their decisions verbally and in writing before their peers. Thus, the course design and assignments capitalized on the fact that various facets of marketing are integral to the everyday lives of most people. To develop sentence and cultivate emotions, music, poetry and film were used selectively both to complement course concepts, and as an integral part of the lecture and discussion. In the context of making marketing research more actionable, it has been argued that "applied academics share a requirement to make their research accessible, engaging, and even actionable" and further that marketing academics need to reposition their output to "marketing as practice" (Tapp 2003, p. 492, 497). Applying these ideas to marketing education and to the offerings of introductory marketing classes, marketing educators have the responsibility of offering something of value to employers: students not only familiar with marketing as an applied science, but also enthused about it and able to apply their learning to the real world. The use of music as a metaphor in marketing education has been discussed as having some benefits in terms of students' interest, learning and discussion (Weintraub 2005). Music was used in two ways. The first was to play a piece of music played in the classroom to initiate or punctuate particular sessions, mostly as a way of setting the mood for a topic of discussion. The second was to ask students to bring in advertisements that included music they enjoyed or recognized, and to ask them to set their branding poems to a piece of popular music or rhythm.

Poetry was used as a means of creating excitement about and stimulating discussion about the theory of branding (Pride and Ferrell 2003). Each student was required to select a brand and study it through an examination of at least one advertisement, catalog, package, store or website visit. They were then to describe the brand in terms of a poem. For this
“brandeme,” which was in essence a metaphor for the brand, they were provided with one optional format for a structure—that of a cinquain. A cinquain is a simple five-line poem that uses the structure: one noun; two adjectives (describing words); three verbs (action words); four emotions (feeling words); one noun (which could be a repetition of the first noun but did not have to be). Students were encouraged not to include the brand name as a noun. We played an in-class guessing game in which students read their brandemes and we attempted to guess the brand from its brandeme. Film was used in a few classes. The author played short films (not advertisements) or extracts to generate discussion about specific marketing techniques. The original classic Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory was used in the class on marketing communications to discuss sales promotions and creating buzz. One or two of the films created by BMW and posted on the bmwfilms.com website as part of a unique marketing strategy and that was not advertisement based were used to initiate discussion of marketing on the Internet, and for a comprehensive discussion of course concepts.

In order to facilitate the ongoing development of thought and sentence throughout the course, design of activities involved four key elements, two to be done individually and two in teams. The individual elements are weekly journal writing, and weekly “show and tell” or informal, experiential oral sharing with peers of marketing phenomena as relevant to the subject of the week. The team elements are weekly formal case presentations, and a semester long marketing study. Thus students had the opportunity to develop interest in specific subjects within the course and to be involved in bite-sized applications and questioning of concepts, as well as to develop a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of marketing application and integration of course concepts.

Pedagogical Innovations and Strategies
It is little short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not already completely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry…. I believe that one could even deprive a healthy beast of prey of its voraciousness if one could force it with a whip to eat continuously whether it were hungry or not...

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

In an effort to whet the students’ appetites for marketing concepts or make them “hungry,” several pedagogical innovations and strategies were used in the introductory marketing class including journal writing, on-line exercises, music, poetry, and film. Examples of these are provided in Table 2. Note that students were assessed for course credit on each of the assignments and were also given two mid-term examinations and a cumulative final examination.

Effectiveness: An Exploration
The result of the educative process is capacity for further education.

John Dewey (1859-1952)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 The WISE Approach in an Introductory Marketing Class</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experiential Learning Activity</strong></td>
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<td>Journal writing: e.g., Wonder about how you experienced a particular concept such as the sales concept</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show &amp; Tell: e.g., Investigate what information you needed for a recent purchase. How and where did you obtain it? How did it affect your decision making? Purchase behaviour? Post purchase behaviour?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case presentations: e.g., Speculate about the alternatives. Can the problem be solved? Do the issues make sense? What should be done?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketing Report: e.g., Wonder about why a brand you are familiar with is (not) successful. Investigate buyer behavior using secondary and primary research. Speculate about how the focal company may improve some aspect of its marketing, opportunities for brand extensions, line extensions, or new products. Evaluate marketing strategies of focal company and its competitor. Decide on one objective and make recommendations on all marketing mix changes required.</td>
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An exploratory look at the effectiveness of these approaches was conducted by examining student assignments, conducting in-depth interviews with students, and reading student comments in instructor sought mid-course feedback and the university course evaluations. First, students were enthused about attending class. Most used their journals regularly and added supplemental materials from their daily lives as consumers. In general, they
were very well prepared to present the cases assigned to their teams, and at least a few students were prepared to ask critical questions of the presenting team. Further, from their journal entries it was clear that listening to case presentations actively with the assigned task of evaluating the presentation in their own journals actually helped solidify marketing concepts. The in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of students revealed that the branding exercises we engaged in, and particularly the poetry or brandeme writing and sharing helped them understand the importance of clear positioning to branding, and of communications to brand associations, brand recognition, and brand equity. Further the psychographic segmentation exercise was not only an opportunity to conduct research online, but also a revelation to students who developed first hand experience of being categorized based on primary research on their attitudes and lifestyle. Sharing their segments not only assisted with memorizing what segmentation was all about also added a lot of humour and fun to the class. The movie segment and short

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<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Experiential Learning Activity</th>
<th>Position in Course Sequence</th>
<th>Deliverable</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
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<tr>
<td>Building interest: course and content, setting expectations: reading and writing are integral to the course.</td>
<td>Scavenger Hunt: Skin the text, and read the syllabus. From the text, identify three concepts and you find interesting in the course. Make sure they are from different parts of the text. Reflect on why these concepts are interesting (e.g., personally relevant) to you. From the syllabus, identify three activities that interest you and reflect on why.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>One page type-written list and reflections</td>
<td>Build familiarity with course breadth &amp; interest in some concepts. Understand students’ perspectives. Quick preliminary assessment of writing skills and motivation levels.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing to learn</td>
<td>Dedicate a small (30 page) journal to this course. Bring it to class everyday but not as your primary notebook. You may use this journal for the weekly show and tell, to doodle and take notes as you read the text and prepare for assignments. We will begin by asking a question about the content for the day. You are to use your journal to write down your reflections on the topic, based on your prior reading of the text, my previous lectures, and your personal experiences as consumers and in the work-force. Use to record your evaluations and questions on weekly team and final term presentations. You may be called on to share or exchange your journal with a peer(s). Your journals will be collected for grading evaluation three times during the course.</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Hand-written journal entries from each class. Sharing with peers when called.</td>
<td>Attendance is a prerequisite for journal participation. Students pay attention to marketing phenomenon in their everyday lives and reflect on how the concepts and theories they are learning apply. Build marketing vocabulary progressively. Students write informally and regularly. Students write reflectively and critically.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiencing marketing theory in action</td>
<td>Visit the SRI website and take the VALS survey. What segment are you categorized in? Reflect on your own behavior as a consumer. Do you think the segment you are placed in makes sense? Illustrate your answer with a few examples of your values and behavior.</td>
<td>Segmentation, targeting and positioning</td>
<td>Printed VALS segmentation output and completed instructor-supplied worksheet.</td>
<td>Technology Use Experiential Learning Reflective and critical thinking and writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning marketing theory</td>
<td>Example: Select a brand and study it through an examination of at least one advertisement, catalog, package, store or website visit. Then write a poem to describe the brand, a “brandeme.” You may use the format of a cinquain or that of any other poem. Your poem may be set to a piece of music or rhythm of your choice. A cinquain is a five-line poem with the structure: one noun; two adjectives (describing words); three verbs (action words); four emotions (feeling words); one noun (which could be a repetition of the first noun but did not have to be). You may or may not have to include the brand name or product category. We will guess the brand from your poem recitation in class.</td>
<td>Product marketing, Branding</td>
<td>Reference material (advertise-ment, printed webpage, package, etc.) Type-written brandeme. Sharing with class if called.</td>
<td>Synthesizing and applying marketing theory Experiential marketing Creative thinking and writing.</td>
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<td>Stimulating discussion</td>
<td>Example: Played segment of movie <em>Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory</em> to open class on promotions. Discussed the creation of buzz, word of mouth effects and purpose of sales promotions</td>
<td>Marketing communications, Sales promotions</td>
<td>Contribution to informal discussion</td>
<td>Creative thinking.</td>
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| Table 2  Pedagogical Innovations and Strategies |

movies made for animated discussion about the nature of sales promotions, comparisons of advertising and sales promotion, and how the internet facilitated targeting.
During the two semesters when the introductory course was taught with the innovations and strategies described in this paper, the students performed better (both in terms of overall grade distributions and in terms of performance on examinations) than in previous semesters. In addition, course evaluations of the course, learning and instructor were systematically higher, with a greater percentage of students taking the time to provide qualitative feedback, much of it positive. If there was a limitation, there were comments that the workload was high, and the instructor treated the students as “graduate” students. In short, these pedagogical innovations met with success in improving student interest, involvement, technology use, learning, and critical thinking.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of designing the introductory course to be challenging with the inclusion of many experiential activities was the frequency of “repeat customers” with students taking electives from the instructor, as well as indicating their intention of changing their major or minor to marketing. In addition, several of the term projects that students worked on as teams were selected for presentation at a regional competition of the Students in Free Enterprise. SIFE is a global non-profit organization active in more than 40 countries. SIFE is funded by financial contributions from corporations, entrepreneurs, foundations, government agencies and individuals. Working in partnership with business and higher education, SIFE establishes student teams on university campuses. These teams are led by faculty advisors and are challenged to develop community outreach projects. SIFE team members leverage their personal educational experiences, the expertise of their faculty advisors, the support of their local business advisory boards, and the resources of their institutions to implement programs that create real economic opportunities for members of their communities. The effectiveness of their programs is judged at competition by leaders from the business community. At competition, SIFE teams present the results of their educational outreach projects and compete to determine which team was most successful at creating economic opportunity for others (www.sife.com). The rookie team (the university had never participated before) won several awards in direct competition with several major universities from the region. In discussions, students perceived that their success was in no small part attributable to the numerous, small, experiential assignments and writing requirements, which prepared them for the semester project.

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