

SWP 44/91 "TEACHING BY DEGREES"

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Teaching by Degrees

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Abstract

This paper is simply a response to a request from a leading British Professor of Marketing for some views on the difference between teaching undergraduates and in-house post experience courses.

It argues that the main emphasis in undergraduate teaching should remain on knowledge acquisition and on providing a sound conceptual foundation of scholarship. Teachers should not be seduced into skimping on this in order to give students more skills.

In the case of practising managers, particularly on in-house courses, the circumstances in which marketing has to be taught can be many and varied. The principal barriers to overcome are frequently attitudinal and cultural. Some guidance is given on how to overcome such barriers. Teachers here are strongly advised to avoid primary school teaching methods in order to win good post course evaluations. Instead, they should adopt a style more akin to the university model.

Finally, the paper argues that more attention should be paid to using advanced technology solutions in marketing for both knowledge and skills teaching.

TEACHING BY DEGREES

A paper by McDonald (1990), shows that most of the foundation tools of marketing education are not actually used in industry. It concluded that this is principally because:

- i. there are too many methodological problems of a purely technical kind;
- ii. networks of complex business problems cannot be solved by one method alone, so technique interrelationships need to be better understood;

The paper recommended that advanced technology solutions need to be used more in the domain of marketing education and practice to overcome these problems.

Another paper by McDonald (1991), specially written for the 1991 M.E.G. Conference, explores in some detail the reasons why the gap between marketing theory and practice is greater in the domain of marketing than in any other discipline. It probes into the environmental mosaic of marketing to establish what happens between the teaching of marketing theory on courses and what practising marketers actually do in the world of business. The paper concludes that a fundamental reappraisal needs to take place of what we as marketing teachers do.

It is not possible, however, to carry out this reappraisal, unless some consideration is given to the different circumstances in which marketing is taught.

This short paper is in response to a request from a leading Professor of Marketing to offer some views on the differences between the teaching of marketing to undergraduates and to experienced, practising marketers.

It comes at an appropriate time, since there seems to be growing concern about the state of marketing in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, it can be argued that we have more than our fair share of world class marketing faculty. Certainly, our courses at all levels have always been, and continue to be, in great demand. On the other hand, it can be argued that the practice of marketing in the U.K. is generally poor, in spite of four decades of structured education.

The figures show that, during a decade of Thatcherism, all we have managed to do as a nation is to improve our productivity, and even now we still lag behind the Germans, the Americans and most others. Somehow or other, the secret of profitable growth seems to have eluded us.

In this respect, the thesis of the author's other current M.E.G. paper still holds true, and we must surely all continue to explore new, better, more innovative and more effective ways of getting the message of marketing across.

Accepting this, we can now explore, in a somewhat open minded and illuminative way, the differences between teaching marketing at undergraduate and post experience levels.

Teaching Undergraduates

The teaching of undergraduates is relatively straight forward, compared to the teaching of their post experience contemporaries. For one thing, the learning environment is custom built and numerous back-up facilities exist to help the student.

Moreover, the student population is remarkably homogeneous, being young, intelligent, untainted by work experience, idealistic and above all, experienced as 'learners'. All these factors, coupled with the students' desire to learn more about marketing, make it possible for the marketing teacher to concentrate entirely on the content of the programme and its learning design.

Problems about dealing with attitudinal and motivational issues among the students rarely exist, because the need to pass examinations ensures that there is a sufficient desire to learn. Thus, teaching success boils down to curriculum design and getting the right balance between knowledge and skill. The skilled teacher sets up a learning process which ensures that the student moves along a continuum from conceptualisation, through marketing skills, to a consideration of implementation issues.

Is Teaching Marketing to Undergraduates Pointless?

John Hughes (1988), in his wide-ranging review of the teaching of management education, expressed the following view:

"The mistake we have made in teaching during the past forty years has been to follow the logic approach in teaching theory first, followed by an assumed application in practice. The bridge from theory to practice is too hard to cross without some prior knowledge of the "other side".

Few of us would agree with such a view in respect of undergraduate teaching. Whilst we would not disagree that learning, doing and feedback on performance can be more valuable than theoretical knowledge on its own, neither would we disagree that theory and knowledge are crucial in helping students to interpret, illuminate and illustrate the subsequent experiences they will have. There is value in teaching marketing at undergraduate level to those without experience. This is because, in structuring problems, the ability to think conceptually is acknowledged as a key attribute in successful management. Also, by very careful selection and use of teaching and learning devices, such as case studies, business games, projects, computer based training, and the like, a substantial element of experiential learning can take place. The real value in such courses, however, as ever, lies in the eventual ability of the students to think conceptually about problems.

Some years ago, at a M.E.G. Conference, two marketing lecturers wrote a paper stressing the pragmatic nature of their undergraduate marketing courses. The author, for one, was unimpressed by the line of argument pursued. He still prefers a manager who can help a company structure the problem properly rather than one who can actually do market research. However appealing it is to produce students with lots of skills, it is still our duty to produce students with the ability to conceptualise. The real, hard-nosed practical skills can always be grafted on later. "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Most managers boast that their expertise has been built up from experience and an intuitive grasp of problem-solving in the real world. Indeed, some of the world's leading business people acknowledge that they owe their success not to formal business education, but to their own experience, flair and intuitive judgement, gained in the "university of life".

Yet, not surprisingly, many of yesterday's management "heroes" have subsequently gone bankrupt or have failed. It is the author's view that such failure is the result of their inability to intellectualise the underlying reasons for their success and to transfer their success to new, more challenging situations. Many of them have just been lucky and have ridden on a tide of growth and the comparatively easy marketability of products and services since the second world war. Now, however, disorientated by an increasingly complex and abrasive environment and confronted by static or declining markets, the intellectual weaknesses of many

of these managers have been exposed. There can be little doubt that a new breed of manager is now required, and such managers will surely emerge from the body of undergraduate and postgraduate students. The new breed will place greater emphasis on identifying the forces in the outside environment and developing appropriate strategic responses.

Undergraduate teaching, then, does not appear to pose too many problems and it is hoped that all those who are engaged in this activity will persevere and recognise the valuable contribution they are making to the future prosperity of our society.

The author urges such teachers not to concentrate too heavily on skills at the expense of conceptualisation.

Let us now turn our attention to two very different kinds of situations - the public marketing programme for marketers and the in-company programme. Let us also consider two types of incompany programmes - the general management kind and the marketing management kind.

The Public Marketing Programme

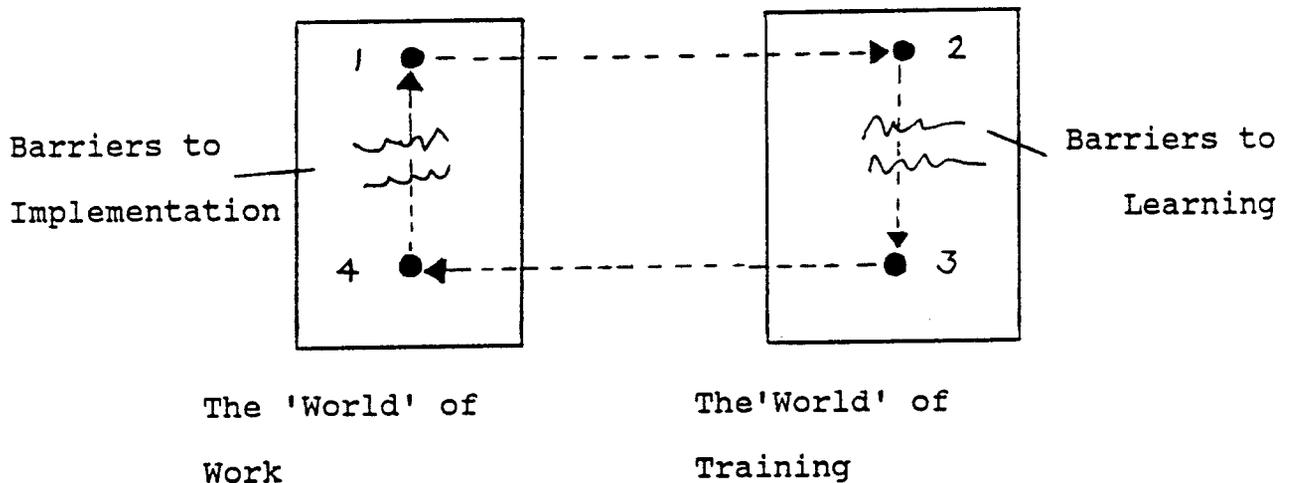
We can deal with this variant quickly and easily, pointing up a major problem, however, along the way.

There is rarely a problem, in the author's view, in running a "successful" public performance devoted entirely to marketing, whether it be a specialist subject or a more broad one. Generally

speaking, in such cases, the audience is interested, so there is no problem with attitudes, and delegates are keen to learn lots of practical marketing skills, a need which is comparatively easy for most experienced marketing teachers to satisfy.

Herein lies the real problem, however, for what do most marketing teachers believe the constituents of "success" to be in running a public marketing programme for experienced managers? The simple answer, of course, is the post-course evaluation, which generally speaking, asks delegates to give marks for content, presentation, whether the course achieved its objectives and so on.

The trouble is that such post-course evaluation misses the real point about what should be measured. The following diagram illustrates why the spotlight of evaluation is often focussed on the wrong area.



The dotted line in the diagram represents the trainee's route between the two 'worlds' of work and training. The journey starts at point 1, where a need is identified at work. An external course is selected and starts (point 2), runs its length,

finishing at point 3. The trainee then returns to work (point 4) topped up with new skills and knowledge, ready to tackle the problem which made the 'learning journey' necessary in the first place.

Clearly, the evaluation ought to concentrate on the extent to which the trainee solves the problem in the world of work (the gap between points 1 and 4), not solely on the training event (what happens between points 2 and 3).

The trouble is that most post-course evaluation places more emphasis on the trainer and course 'trappings' than on either the material itself, or on the total learning process. The trainer, or course leader, thus becomes a performer whose future success depends on the appraisal of the trainer by those trained. The problem here is that what managers want may not be what they need.

Medium V Message

What they want are short sessions, plenty of variety, professional presentations, lots of activities and practice of the techniques. All of these are seen as being of immediate practical relevance to the delegates' own experience, whereas "theory" and "concepts" are seen as being of little immediate practical relevance. Thus, the action learning sessions score highly, whilst the conceptual sessions are marked down. The result is that such courses become increasingly slanted towards action, in which the learners play an energetic role. They are kept busy and work to tight deadlines on a variety of tasks set by the trainer. Unfortunately, little

In the case of public marketing programmes, whilst the time-scale is considerably shorter, a similar learning model should, nonetheless, still be used. To achieve this end, vehicles such as case studies can be appropriate, in which diagnosis is more important than recommendations for specific courses of action. Practice in technique applications can, and should, come later.

This process is often easier to implement on public courses attended by young managers with a good educational background, because they intuitively understand the need to think for themselves. In the case of older managers without formal education, the temptation on the part of the trainer is to forego all theory and conceptual elements and to impose a directive, packaged series of practical inputs designed to achieve high scores on the course appraisal.

Top-notch teachers, of course, will have none of this nonsense and always succeed in forcing conceptual understanding as well as ensuring an adequate level of application skills. It is possible to achieve the same high appraisal scores whilst following such a course design without abrogating professional responsibility for the long term well-being of the student.

The kinds of teaching methods available to achieve this will be discussed later.

In-Company Marketing Programmes

Increasingly today, companies are running in-house courses designed to make them more marketing orientated. Such courses usually involve other functional managers. It is these which pose the greatest problems for the marketing teacher.

Unlike undergraduates, the 'student' population for in-company courses is often composed of older, experienced managers who have been absent from the world of learning for some time. In truth, it is often found that some of these people do not possess the same intellectual ammunition as the younger university student. Also many of these managers have suffered hard knocks in the 'university of life' and as a result they are sceptical that things can ever change. At times they can be downright cynical and destructive.

Regardless of the make up of the trainee population for in-company courses, there are also a welter of varied learning situations in which the teachers find themselves.

The Context of Marketing Teaching

The complexity of the teaching situation can be compounded by any combination of the following factors:-

1. Level of Manager

Ranging from Junior/ Middle to Senior/Director

2. Type of Manager

Ranging from Marketing Specialists to Other Functional Specialists

3. Type of Course

Ranging from General Marketing to Specialist Topic within Marketing (eg. Marketing Research; Advertising)

4. Length of course

Ranging from Short to Long

5. Level of Teaching

Ranging from Introductory to Advanced

6. Education Level

Ranging from Secondary education to Post-graduate

7. Teaching Method

Low level of student involvement

Teaching
(eg. Lectures, Case Studies)

High level of student involvement

Learning
(eg. C.B.T., Videos, Projects, Expert Systems, business games)

8. Relevance/Background Pressure

Company/student

Smug about current
marketing expertise

Company/student

Aware that it is important
to know more about
marketing, eg. company in
trouble.

It is possible to add one further dimension. If the ultimate objective of in-company marketing education is to improve company performance, then one can surmise that improved performance will be a function of knowledge, skills and attitude. Thus:-

$$IP = f (K + S) A$$

No experienced teacher embarks on any course before carefully establishing where the emphasis needs to be placed on each of the elements in this equation.

Within this framework, it is possible to take many of the combinations from the above typology, and decide very easily whether the emphasis should be placed on knowledge, skills or attitude, and what the appropriate balance should be.

Clearly, there are many possible combinations from the above categorisation and indeed others may choose an entirely different typology. Some combinations can obviously be omitted, as it is highly unlikely that one would be asked to teach a specialist

marketing subject at advanced level on a general management programme for non marketing personnel, nor, probably, to Directors.

It would be impracticable to incorporate into a short paper such as this, all the realistic combinations, and indeed, some of them do not constitute a problem anyway. For example, teaching a specialist subject at advanced level to a group of specialists is generally easy, providing of course, there is a competent teacher. This has much to do with the intense interest that the students bring to the course. There is, therefore, no problem with attitude and the teacher can concentrate on choosing the appropriate teaching and learning method to achieve the right balance between knowledge and skills.

Attitude Problems

Other functional specialists, however, who have been "selected" to attend a General Management Programme (whether in-house or public), pose an entirely different teaching challenge. Many come along agog with indifference about marketing - some even with a deep dislike of it - so the principle need here is to devise a programme which will change their attitudes about marketing, and it is important to choose a curriculum of varied teaching and learning devices, being careful to inject just the right amount of technique explanation into the more conceptual, philosophical material.

The author has always found this kind of marketing teaching to be far and away the most challenging, and it was only after ten years of experimentation that the "right" approach was developed. It is still, nonetheless, physically and mentally, a draining experience.

Knowledge and Skills

Teaching introductory marketing to marketers, or would-be marketers, on the other hand, seems to be the easiest of all, as it is possible to concentrate on the content and the teaching/learning method, without having to worry about the attitude and motivation of the delegates. In such situations, "success" depends very much on getting the right balance between knowledge and skill.

While the teacher is attempting to equip his students with the appropriate levels of knowledge and skills, and to have a positive attitude to marketing, there is another dimension which can influence his chances of being successful. This dimension affects both public and in-company courses, but because of the specificity of the latter, it affects in-company courses more profoundly.

Barriers to Learning

The author was recently asked to run a series of in-house marketing programmes for a major global company that had narrowly avoided a hostile take over. Its shares had consistently underperformed the FTSE average. The Chairman decided that his company

should be more market-orientated, and marketing programmes were to be a significant part of the change process.

One such event revolved around the important subject of marketing creativity. Yet, the expressions of fathomless vacuity on the faces of participants revealed a massive disjuncture between the aims and content of the course and the deeply hierarchical structure within the organisation that penalised initiative, rewarded compliance and subservience, and discouraged anyone but the most senior managers from using their initiative.

Facing this situation, managers on such a course would clearly be stupid to change their behaviour, as to do so would lead to punishment. The result, of course, was that they paid lipservice to the course, and no tutor, no matter how skilled, could possibly succeed.

Another problem relates to what has been described as the "tribal mentality" (McDonald, 1989) within organisations. Because companies generally organise themselves into functional groups, they invent their own rules, procedures, norms, values, budgets, reward and punishment processes, and generally operate in a way designed to protect the systems they have so painstakingly built over a number of years.

Managers do not abandon such power lightly. Indeed, when threatened by a movement perceived as giving more power to the marketing department, hostile attitudes are developed and obstacles are placed in the way of any movement towards change.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in-company courses attended by such people, tend to be difficult, to say the least. Often, a totally unreasonable burden is placed on the shoulders of the trainer, and in the author's view, it is irresponsible to take on such a responsibility, as little good will come of it. Furthermore, the trainer will be blamed for a poor performance.

How to Overcome These Barriers

(i) Measure Corporate Culture

Corporate culture lies at the heart of many of the problems that marketing teachers experience in the management of in-company programmes.

It is not appropriate in a paper such as this to attempt to summarise such a deeply complex subject, but readers who are motivated to learn more about the impact that corporate culture has on marketing within organisations should read a paper which is due for publication concurrent with the M.E.G. Conference (McDonald 1991).

What is appropriate here, however, is to stress that the author will no longer run in-company programmes unless the organisation completes a corporate culture assessment questionnaire (known as The Organisational Development Diagnostic - O.D.D.) This enables the author to assess the richness of the "soil" into which he has been asked to plant the marketing "seed". If "concrete" is found, then it is a complete waste of everyone's time to attempt to run Marketing programmes. Indeed, it would be grossly irresponsible.

The result of this very sophisticated process, however, is not only that it weeds out impossible situations for the marketing teacher, but also that it ensures that the actual course design will be wholly appropriate for the specific circumstances of the organisation being trained.

For example, there is clearly a substantial difference in course design for a small, young, entrepreneurial company and a global, highly centralised and focused organisation. In between, there will be many variations ranging from bottom-up to top-down driven companies, to coordinated, team-driven organisations. It is the author's experience that merely turning up with a predetermined course design is a recipe for failure. It's a bit like starting with an answer and making the client's problem fit the answer. It rarely works.

Clearly, this in itself is very different from undergraduate teaching, which will not change significantly from year to year, so there can be a large element of predetermined and prescribed course material.

(ii) Use Learning Materials Creatively

Recently, much publicity has been given to the paucity of management education in British industry, and of the acute need for more managers educated to M.B.A. standard. The Daily Telegraph leader of 1st June 1989, criticised our

leading business schools for being too small and suggested a rapid programme of expansion to overcome the current elitism.

The danger of the current distance learning type responses to this is that "more" may mean "worse", although it does not have to, and some institutions are being careful not to prostitute and devalue the M.B.A. degree. Grave doubts, however, still remain about others.

The real value, however, of excellent distance learning approaches, lies in the more efficient and effective use of existing resources, with Computer Based Training (CBT) and other suitable material being used for basic knowledge acquisition, supplemented by short, powerful, interactive tutorial sessions to add value to the more cognitive material.

Increasingly, whether on undergraduate or practising manager sessions, it does not make sense to be using very scarce top-flight academics to stand in a room and "teach" knowledge to students. This is a massive mis-use of scarce resources, given that there are more cost-effective ways of covering the basics.

Professor Holmberg's (1977) definition of distance learning is a useful starting point in considering this issue:-

"The various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with

their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nonetheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of the tutorial organisation".

The author's own matrix, which follows, helps further clarify the issue:

DISTANCE EDUCATION MATRIX

	Distanced	Not Distanced
Student Based (Learning)	1	2
Teacher Based (Teaching)	3	4

Box 4 is the traditional course strategy, and one that is becoming increasingly costly, ineffective and outmoded.

Boxes 1 and 3 need to be the subject of a separate paper, because they are outside the scope of the current discussion.

We will confine ourselves, then, to Box 2.

On both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in particular, it is clear that much of the basic cognitive material can be more effectively communicated by means of programmed learning materials involving textbooks, videos, C.B.T. and the like. At Cranfield, for example, all Executive M.B.A. students have to own a laptop computer and much of the basic learning is done using this mode. The students communicate with their tutor and with other members of their study group via Telecom Gold.

On the full time M.B.A. programme, increasing use is also being made of CBT material and CBT self-assessment tests, supplemented by intense tutorials. The bigger lecture room sessions are then able to concentrate more on applications and on exploring difficult, related issues in an interactive mode.

Increasingly, the same medium is being used for public and in-house Cranfield seminars and workshops, to great effect. The only barrier preventing a quicker movement in this direction is the lack of suitable computer facilities when such courses are run either in-house or in hotels, but hopefully, this barrier will gradually disappear with the increasing acceptance of computers in industry.

The author's experience is that on in-company workshops, delegates thoroughly enjoy using sophisticated learning devices like CBT.

All of this, however, concerns only the knowledge elements of learning, and still leaves the remaining dimensions of skill and attitude to be dealt with by the course leader.

Most would agree that the latter (attitude) really has to be dealt with by the tutor and that there is little of substance that can be achieved by CBT. To a certain extent, skills can be tackled by CBT, particularly where case studies are used.

These, however, are of more value on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, where students come from a variety of backgrounds and organisations and are away from the world of work for long periods of study.

On in-company workshops, however, delegates are usually anxious to try out their knowledge on their own company problems, and until recently, little was available on computers to help with this. So the usual device was to set mini-projects on specific company issues.

Now, however, the author has started to close the loop between theory and practice by developing a series of one off skills packages which are implemented on a computer, somewhat along the lines of a mini expert system. For example, there is a package which allows delegates to put their own data and information into a directional policy matrix. The computer automatically constrains both axes, calculates the ratios and the square root of the volume or value to determine the area of the circles and enables as many scenarios as desired to be calculated in a matter of seconds. Another such package tackles the problem of gap analysis, and more are on the way to cope with market segmentation, new product evaluation and launch, and so on (McDonald, 1991).

Research is currently being carried out by the author using the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (1971) to ensure that best use is made of such materials and that different learning styles are taken account of in their development.

Conclusion

This paper started out as a simple response to a request for some views on the difference between teaching undergraduates and in-house post experience courses. It developed along the way into a more broad-ranging review of marketing education in Britain.

The conclusions, at least to the author, are very clear. At undergraduate and postgraduate levels, much more effective use has to be made of our scarce teaching resources, whilst the temptation should be avoided to skimp on the teaching of knowledge and on providing a sound conceptual foundation of marketing scholarship. Only when this has been done, should teachers consider how best to provide some of the elementary skills required of successful marketing practitioners.

In the case of practising managers, particularly on in-house courses, the principal problem is often attitudinal, and some guidance was provided on how to overcome this. Teachers were also strongly advised to avoid the primary school teaching method in order to get a favourable delegate review and adopt, instead, a style more akin to the university model.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to using advanced technology solutions in marketing for both knowledge and skills acquisition.

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