A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO ACTIVE LEARNING

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ACTIVE LEARNING IDEA GENERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION PANEL POSITION PAPER

Marketing educators can increase student involvement, attention, engagement, motivation, and learning by adopting an active learning philosophy, that is, the belief that learning is doing (Jensen & Owen 2001; Wooldridge 2006). Unfortunately, such a philosophy is often difficult for teachers to adopt, as many teachers are uncertain about how to develop active learning exercises and how to incorporate them into their classroom teaching. To address this challenge, we will present three approaches to active learning that have proven effective in a wide range of undergraduate and graduate marketing courses. But first, let’s discuss an important foundation of the active learning approach: viewing teaching as a process of strategic planning.

When designing active learning activities, it is important to remember that active learning exercises should not be designed merely for the sake of keeping students active. Keeping students active is not the goal. Instead, the goal is to develop activities that enable students to learn the skills and abilities necessary for them to achieve their future professional and academic goals.

With this in mind, it is best to approach active learning—indeed, teaching in general—the same way that companies and organizations approach strategic planning (Graeff 2010). A primary aim of corporate strategic planning is to first identify the organization’s overall goals, and then identify the strategies, tactics, and resources necessary to achieve those goals. Similarly, by identifying students’ long-term academic and professional goals, teachers can strategically plan class activities to achieve those desired goals and objectives.

To get started, an easy way to identify students’ career, academic, and life goals is to consider what students will be doing ten to fifteen years after graduating, and the types of careers or professions that students will have. After identifying students’ long-range goals, teachers must identify the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that students will need in order to achieve their goals. What can students learn from this class that will help them perform the activities, behaviors, and decisions that will be required of them in their future careers? What activities can be carried out in class that will simulate these types of behaviors and decisions? Teachers should then develop in-class activities that fit with students’ academic and professional goals.

Teachers must then determine the specific course content and material students need to learn to in order to master the skills that are necessary for success in their future. Demonstrating the relevance of course material to students’ lives will result in increased involvement, interest, and attention. This is because students will see the direct (or indirect) connection of the material to their future career and life goals.

One way educators can help students achieve their future goals and attain long-term satisfaction is to have them engage in self-directed learning (SDL). SDL is defined as a process in which learners take the initiative in planning, implementing, and evaluating their own learning needs and outcomes, with or without the help of others (Knowles 1975). Not only does SDL have a positive impact on one’s educational experience, SDL has also been shown to have a positive impact on work-related constructs such as motivation and job performance (Boyer, Edmondson & Artis 2011). Because of these outcomes, it is imperative that marketing educators determine how to effectively apply SDL to marketing students.

Educators can best facilitate SDL by becoming a coach and facilitator rather than just an information provider or lecturer. In most cases, the role of the educator would be to assist the student in locating the necessary resources, help the student identify a starting point for his project, make sure that the student is aware of the objectives and evaluation criteria once this has been decided upon, and provide examples of previously acceptable work.
A well-designed SDL project is one in which students are given a say in what they are doing. This allows them to have more control over their learning and gives them ownership of the project. These projects must be relevant to students’ interests and goals, and flexible enough to let students think for themselves. In addition, it is important to provide the student with opportunities to engage in systematic reflection in which she critically examines her experiences and personally reflects on what she learned in the project.

SDL projects can vary from simple to complex, as the following three marketing-related examples demonstrate. A simple SDL project might include just allowing the student to select the topic for a marketing project or presentation. In this situation, the educator would provide the desired format and evaluation criteria; however, the student would be given the opportunity to select the topic that is relevant to his or her interests.

A somewhat more complex SDL project, especially useful for Marketing Research, is to allow students not only to decide on the topic area for their project (e.g., give them control to create a new product or service), but also to decide what types of marketing research would be best-suited for the project. In this situation, the educator would provide the initial starting point for the project and then assist the student as needed.

A complex SDL project, especially useful for graduate courses, is to have students bring in their resume, write up what they want the resume to look like in five years, and identify the skills they believe will help them get to that future resume. At that point, students will work with the educator to create a plan to learn those specific skills (e.g., consulting work, software knowledge, etc.), making sure to include the criteria for evaluating that plan. The students will then meet frequently with the educator to discuss how they are progressing with their plan.

A marketing project that epitomizes the SDL approach is the National Student Advertising Competition (NSAC) organized by the American Advertising Federation (AAF). One of the more popular career options for marketing students is working in advertising. Unfortunately, many students find that they do not have enough relevant work experience to compete for an entry-level position in advertising, or to even know if they would enjoy working in this field. One of the best ways, other than an internship, to address this experience gap is to participate in the NSAC.

Each year, a company or non-profit sponsors the NSAC and provides a case study reflecting a real-world situation facing the organization. Students at AAF-member colleges team up to conduct research on the sponsor’s current situation and develop an integrated communications campaign for the “client.” Each team then "pitches" its campaign to a panel of judges at district competitions across the country. The winning team in each AAF district advances to compete in the national finals, which are held in conjunction with the AAF’s annual conference.

At some schools, their NSAC team originates with their student advertising club. However, at many schools, the NSAC is integrated into an upper-level marketing or advertising course. When using the NSAC as the main project for a marketing course, an instructor is advised to adhere to the role described earlier in our discussion of SDL.

As a class project, the NSAC offers many benefits to marketing instructors. First and foremost, the NSAC provides a semester-long, experiential learning activity without having to find willing clients and manage these relationships. Instructors also receive excellent teaching resources and support, further reducing their burden. There also is a quantifiable outcome—the students’ ranking in the competition—which enables instructors to objectively evaluate what students have learned.

Regardless of the path students pursue in the marketing field, they are certain to face ambiguous decision scenarios that have ethical implications on a regular basis. Therefore, it is essential that marketing students develop their capacity for ethical decision-making. Helping marketing students hone their ethical values and judgment is best achieved through the active learning approach; reading and hearing about ethics can only accomplish so much.

In one notable example, an instructor created several short cases representing the types of ethical dilemmas marketing managers are likely to encounter over the course of their careers. These cases involved product pricing, harmful products, sales channel conflicts, and behavioral advertising. The common thread is that the students are asked to consider realistic scenarios, struggle with the pros and cons of a particular decision, and arrive at a recommendation after thoroughly considering the ethical implications of that recommendation.
To learn more this instructor’s approach, let’s examine a case involving setting the price for a new drug that significantly eases the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. The students came to class having read two articles describing two different ethical lenses, utilitarianism and Catholic Social Teaching (CST). The class session began with a review of the key features and tenets of these two ethical frameworks. Next, the instructor sketched out the parameters of the case: 1) the pharmaceutical company typically requires a payback period of two years for new drugs; 2) given the sales forecast for the drug, a two-year payback period would result in a monthly price of $1,500; and 3) some members of the team tasked with the pricing recommendation have argued that a lower price should be set so that more afflicted people could afford the drug.

Then, working in small groups of between two and four students, the students were asked to analyze the scenario from the perspective of utilitarianism and identify the appropriate price. The groups were given approximately 10 minutes for this discussion. Then the instructor asked the teams to identify the components and the utility assigned to the cost and benefit calculations. After all of the key costs and benefits were identified, the class as a whole discussed what is the “right” price.

Following this, the student groups were given about 10 minutes to analyze the same case from the perspective of CST. Again the whole class had a discussion about the “right” price. Often the two ethical frameworks will yield two different answers, which sets up an interesting discussion about how marketing professionals must often weigh a wide variety of interests: their own professional interests, the bottom line of their employer, other stakeholders, and society as a whole.

All of the active learning activities described in this paper share three characteristics. First, they are designed to help students acquire knowledge and master skills that will help them achieve their long-term goals. Second, they simulate the types of decisions marketing professionals face on a regular basis. Third, they give students a say in what they are doing, which affords them more control over their learning and gives them ownership of the project. But it all starts by approaching teaching as a process akin to strategic planning. An educator should first take steps to identify the career goals of his or her students, and then select course content and design activities that will help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to achieve those aspirations. This approach results in a course that is highly relevant to students, which leads to increased motivation, engagement, learning, and retention.

REFERENCES


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