

## **Using auto/ethnography to gain insight into teaching with problem-based learning: a student's perspective**

*Thomas Baker, University of New South Wales, tomcbaker@gmail.com*

*Tania Bucic, University of New South Wales, t.bucic@unsw.edu.au*

### **Abstract**

Problem based learning is being applied in marketing courses as an effective means of developing knowledge and skills in a contextualised setting. However, courses continue to be evaluated using the traditional CATEI questionnaire which provides very limited feedback and modest direction for instructors seeking to improve their courses. In this paper we pilot the use of learner auto/ethnography to gather detailed information that may assist with course improvement. This new method shows potential as a tool for collecting detailed insight about the student experience and presents enormous potential for informing course improvement.

Key words: auto/ethnography, student perspective, course feedback, problem based teaching

## **Using auto/ethnography to gain insight into teaching with problem-based learning: a student's perspective**

### **Introduction**

Two key skills that have been identified by business leaders as important competencies for the purpose of solving unstructured real-world problems are team work and analytical skills (Goltz, et al., 2008). Educators attempt to foster the development of such skills though this is an enormously taxing task requiring carefully crafted balance between independent and collaborative learning in a highly contextualised setting. Understanding, disentangling and solving problems are among the most significant challenges educators face in undergraduate marketing courses (e.g., Paladino, 2008) – a situation possibly related to research findings showing marketing students to be the poorest performing students relative to other business majors both coming in to and leaving university (Aggarwal et al., 2007). Interestingly, the typical teaching method that continues to be implemented in marketing classrooms is the traditional didactic approach of lecture and tutorial despite knowledge of such student conditions and simultaneous educator focus on development of complex skills. Inherently, it is reasonable to question whether an alternative method of course delivery that encourages innovative approaches may be better suited. Problem-based learning (PBL) is one such approach that has been developed to support the delivery of relevant and engaging education (Goltz et al., 2008).

### **Problem based learning**

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an innovative approach that encourages close interaction among learners, instructors and the task at hand. It may be helpful in reducing learning barriers, offering support for cultivating a collaborative and supportive learning environment, and encouraging students to identify a problem, take responsibility and actively solve it. Despite being relatively new in marketing education it has been applied with success in the Netherlands where small group teaching is dominant (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 2000; Davis and Harden, 1999).

Two central principles exist for guiding the PBL approach; (1) the problem is the focus of attention; (2) attempting to solve the problem is the basis for learning about specific contextualised content (Sherwood, 2004). Real-life experience is offered through multifaceted and messy problems (Bigelow, 2004). Altogether, the resulting situation is a highly contextualised learning environment.

### **Context**

To contextualise my application of PBL, I used this approach in a second-year marketing subject. The subject content was taught around a real-life problem presented by a real-life client. Using a constructivist approach the feature problem grounding the subject was unstructured and required students to be responsible for determining what they need to know about the problem in order to define and solve it (Bigelow, 2004). This entailed a necessary client meeting, tutorial debrief and review of secondary data from self-directed search and selection. A just-in-time teaching method facilitated meaningful learning, espousing relevant knowledge and skill to apply that knowledge to the grounded problem (e.g., Bolton, 1999). The instructors were present to facilitate the learning process and to ensure timely progress. Further, learners were divided into tutorials and then into smaller teams within which the major project must be executed. Teamwork assists skill development (Duch, Groh and Allen,

2001) through interpersonal skill development and also through provision of a structure for knowledge to be absorbed through (Fink, 2002).

From my perspective as course designer, PBL appears as a highly suitable instruction method in terms of knowledge delivery, embedding and skill development. To inform course improvement it is important to have student insights regarding course structure, implications of current content, style of delivery, skills learned and perceptions of relevance. To be of even greater benefit these insights should be relative to the traditional didactic approach. Unfortunately however, this request is beyond the scope and capabilities of the widely used CATEI evaluation system for informing course feedback in Australian universities.

### **Methods of Course Evaluation: CATEI**

Australian university courses are typically centrally evaluated using Course and Teaching Evaluation Improvement (CATEI) quantitative questionnaires that are generally poorly structured and have limited items for course evaluation. The main purpose of scores generated from frequency counts is to determine a numerical indicator of student satisfaction based on one question (*overall, were you satisfied with the course*) and to give guidance to the instructor on areas for improvement (such as feedback) – also numerical scores based on one question (*this instructor provided helpful feedback*). However, the frequency scores have limited usefulness to instructors who are seeking to improve their courses because the single frequency scores do not give clear insight into the student experience and *how* the course can be improved and reasons *why* students feel this way. In addition, students frequently rush to complete CATEI evaluations, have propensity to misuse these as opportunities to “punish” instructors and are requested to complete these prior to completion of the subject despite students not having had chance for reflection about the course and their own learning. Thus, traditional course evaluation using the CATEI questionnaire is limited for the purpose of informing course improvement, whether didactic or novel.

To capture intricacies of learning and development that more accurately reflect the journey of the student an alternative method of data collection is required. A method that allows for personal situation, personal understanding and growth would be of value to instructors seeking a truly informed perspective of the learner experience in the course. Such information could be captured using the auto/ethnographic approach from the student perspective.

### **Auto/ethnographic research approach**

Auto/ethnography is a qualitative research method that is a type of critique that identifies zones of contact, conquest and of self and culture (Neuman, 1996, p191). It has been used in many academic disciplines (Wright, 2009, Richardson, 2000, McAdams, 1997, Sheibe, 1986). New to marketing, it has much to offer as it relies on a reflexive approach for exploration of highly contextualised issues from a personal perspective. That is, the researcher turns the analytic lens on themselves and their interactions, while writing, interpreting and performing narratives about significant experiences (Chase, 2005). Through disclosing deeply embedded perspectives (McIlveen, 2008) auto/ethnography can be perceived as a mean to create space and dialogue that instigates and shapes change (Holman Jones, 2005). Given the highly embedded and personalised nature of this method, trustworthiness and authenticity are relatively easily established. Auto/ethnography operationalises critical consciousness and is thereby useful as a tool to generate insight from different perspectives involved in the learning process.

In this paper we adapt the auto/ethnographic research approach to the context of marketing education as we seek to explore the potential usefulness of such a method to gain insight about the student experience. Specifically, we use one student's detailed account of his experience in a market research subject in order to better understand the learner's experiences throughout all stages of the project, perceptions and value of the capability and skills development. The student's account of learning is contrasted between two subjects offered simultaneously and at the same level— one delivered using problem-based learning and the other using a traditional lecture and tutorial delivery method.

### **Auto/ethnography: through the lens of a student**

*It seems ironic that the notion of consumer satisfaction is so imperative to marketing strategy but not once in three years of tertiary education have I ever been asked 'if I enjoyed the course'. As a twenty year old Industrial Design student forced to take two mandatory marketing subjects, my goal is to take you beyond the crudely coloured in oval on an anonymous teaching evaluation and relate my experience of studying Marketing for a semester.*

*Discouraged by a recent graduate who told me "yeah, just one of those subjects you have to get done", the prospect of a mandatory marketing skills subject seemingly unrelated to my hopeful future profession was disheartening. Thankfully, I had earmarked the Marketing Research (MR) lecture as a neat lunch break falling directly after Consumer Behaviour (CB), a subject offering pop-psychology and potentially degree-relevant information. None the less, I was intent on going into both subjects with an open mind.*

*CB begun on an atypical note; 'don't worry about the textbook, and just use the lectures as your primary source of information'. That certainly set the premise for the subject – 'what I tell you is how it is'. I gave the lecturer the benefit of the doubt and assumed there was much to get through, so lecture notes were the best way of keeping it concise. However, I feel beginning a subject on such an authoritarian premise sets a subject off on a well trodden path of students fearful and unwilling of expressing an individual opinion on a subject.*

*In a highly familiar manner, MR began with a steady delivery of information in a typical university-lecture type manner except with the interesting promise of a 'Client Briefing' in week three. I won't pretend that lectures on the pros and cons of qualitative research were overly 'interesting' (a distinct drop in lecture attendance after the mid-lecture intermission might support that claim), but as was the case with the lectures that followed, despite how interesting the material was, it was contextualized through its relevance to the research project.*

*It was in week three that the essence of the MR subject came to fruition with the introduction of a real client to provide us with a briefing for our research project. The prospect of a real client project was interesting albeit rather alien – this was one of the few reinforcing gestures on behalf of the university that we were actually receiving a professionally relevant education. The experience of asking a real client a real question was nothing short of authentic. After the briefing, we had the opportunity to question the client. After a worrying number of repeat questions, I got the opportunity to raise an issue I felt was exceptionally poignant to the product and my research project. The pressure was on – my one chance to impress my cohort, restore a bit of faith in the mind of the client after a barrage of repeat questions and give my project a clear direction moving forward. I'm understandably unable report on the success of the first two*

*outcomes (it seemed to go down well), but the opportunity to ‘write my own assignment’ – to ascertain if my question was of any relevance to the company – formed the basis of my next nine weeks of learning and ultimately differentiated my research project from the other 50 submitted.*

*CB lecturers followed the same routine from week two till week eleven. Prompted by constant reminders from the lecturer that we should be “bringing all this material together”, the process of integrating taught knowledge was largely ignored until the end of semester. Each individual week saw the beginning of a new topic, a new page in my book of notes and another project presentation (with information specific to only that week’s topic).*

*Both MR and CB had a single, large assignment comprising over 40% of the mark for the session. These assignments highlighted the clear differences between the two teaching strategies in operation. At the most primitive level, the assignment for CB was run perpendicular to the course structure, exploring one week’s topic in ‘greater’ detail where MR was run parallel to the course structure, with lectures coinciding with various stages of the project.*

*The MR project, thankfully with five people per group, demanded a large number of non-contact hours. Groups larger than three are always notoriously hard to manage, requiring key assignment of roles and fair delegation of tasks. My past experiences with groups this large have always ended badly, but a cohesive group, all of whom wanted to do well in the assignment, means that there was a high expectation of getting things done on time. Delegating work to other group members is something I have never enjoyed doing - three years of bad groups at Uni reinforced the mentality that if you ‘want something done right, you have to do it yourself’ – so I can say that in doing less of this project I’ve learnt a lot more about working in teams!*

*The parallel nature of the MR assignment kept us motivated to keep on working at it and allowed us to get constant feedback from our tutor on the direction we were taking. More holistically speaking, the concurrent nature of the problem-centric course structure contextualized information – lecture notes became information to help complete the assignment. In a number of tutorials we also got the opportunity to discuss our current situations with other groups within the tutorial allowing a vital opportunity for intra-tutorial-group comparison (and competition).*

*The ‘legitimate’ gathering of results for university projects has always been an awkward topic of discussion among students, but from personal experience, certain situations ‘lend’ themselves to the fabrication of experimental results more than others. Take MR for example, I felt our project had a legitimate value add for the external client, I knew we would get interesting and highly usable data to illustrate our point and I was really involved in the process. Our group held a genuine interest in the (somewhat unknown) experimental outcome and we would have full reign to make recommendations to the client based on our research. Add to that how grossly unethical it would be to intentionally provide misleading to an external client and I can assure you we did every one of the interviews and focus groups presented in our report. The combination of an authentic marketing project combined with a heavy involvement with the project design and a real, justified result left our group with a highly enjoyable assignment we could be proud of. This was a feeling shared among many groups, all of whom seemed eager to present their results in front of the tutorial group and eventually in front of the client.*

*In contrast, CB assignment demanded a deeper analysis of a specific construct of the consumer choice process. However, due to the ‘elementary’ nature of the subject (really, it was an overview*

*of factors derived from many sources), I feel our assignments could be of little 'scientific' value, given our non-existent experimental experience and the fact the constructs we were investigating existed within a well-established framework. Combine this with a very 'authoritarian' premise to the lectures and the notion of adding any 'value' thorough out assignments disappeared along with my engagement with the project and my desire to excel in the subject.*

*In hindsight, I am thoroughly impressed in the way MR, a seeming uninteresting, mandatory subject became something I thoroughly enjoyed doing. My engagement with the major project through the contextualization of weekly lectures (that would otherwise have been summarized and forgotten) created a situation where I was both enjoying what I was doing and feeling like I was learning professionally relevant skills.*

## **Discussion**

The learner auto/ethnography provides a significantly deeper account of the learning process and provides insight into the strengths and weaknesses of both traditional and PBL styles of course delivery. Unlike the CATEI evaluations, the auto/ethnography account clearly pinpoints authenticity of experience as related to perceived value of skills learned and relevance of subject as an overall perception of the PBL course. In contrast, the traditionally delivered subject was perceived to be more instructor and authority-centred with limited cohesion between course content. It was noted that the student felt this type of approach could be more suited to an elementary level subject, despite these two subjects being offered concurrently and pitched to the same students. Clearly, the insights from auto/ethnography are far more valuable than the simple CATEI course evaluations as instructors are presented with more detailed and useful information that may assist in improving specific aspects of courses in order to tailor these more appropriately for the relevant student cohort.

As direction for further development, we acknowledge that further thematic analysis may benefit course enhancements and value derived from such auto/ethnographies. From these findings, we suggest that further use of the auto/ethnography methodology for course improvement may assist in improving the experience of marketing students at university.

## **Concluding Remarks**

To continue cultivating graduates with work-ready skills, instructors must constantly integrate innovative learning and teaching models into course design. Incidentally, teamwork and problem solving are significant concerns that deserve commitment and attention. PBL is one approach that helps instructors facilitate and meaningful learning environment, fostering skills useful for content learning as well as skill development and application in contextualised settings. It is important to not only implement these approaches but to also constantly evaluate the benefit of these from the perspective of various stakeholders, especially learners' using a variety of methods. Traditional evaluation mechanisms such as CATEI may not be the most insightful method of gathering feedback for improvement, thus the time is ripe for newer methods of collecting feedback from learners. In this paper we have explored the used of the auto-ethnographic method from a learner's perspective to reflect on course delivery using PBL compared to traditional didactic delivery. From the student's perspective PBL creates long lasting, professionally relevant learning.

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