

Rethinking experiential learning in marketing education

Experiential learning is “effective learning resulting from active student involvement with an experience and subsequent reflection on that experience” (Camarero, Rodriguez, & San José, 2010:84). Techniques of experiential learning have been extensively used and studied in the context of marketing education, and constitute one of the most thoroughly investigated topics in marketing education research (Gray, Peltier, & Schibrowsky, 2012). However, recent published work suggests that experiential approaches to teaching and learning in marketing may not be entirely unproblematic. Some researchers have suggested that the current cohort of undergraduate marketing students, reportedly used to a didactic and assessment-driven secondary school curriculum, may be resistant to experiential methods. Other researchers have observed that effective experiential learning requires deep engagement in the learning process by students, and that in the absence of such deep engagement it may be impossible to achieve the desired learning objectives. Consequently, the use of experiential methods as a default approach to marketing education, without careful consideration and integration of the underlying theories of experiential learning, could lead to a superficial learning experience. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the risks of this outcome, to alert marketing educators to the risks, and to suggest how these risks could be ameliorated. The paper begins with a summary of recent research into experiential learning in marketing education, from which certain reservations about the use of experiential methods are derived. It is proposed that these reservations may partly be explained by inadequate absorption of the underlying principles of experiential learning into the design of learning activities in marketing, so the subsequent section briefly addresses the origins and principles of experiential learning. The concluding section of the paper offers analysis and advice for marketing educators who are concerned to ground their experiential learning projects more soundly in educational theory.

Experiential learning has long been a subject of interest to marketing educators. The subject was addressed by Marcus in the very first issue of the *Journal of Marketing Education* (Marcus, 1979). In a review of everything published in the *Journal of Marketing Education* since it was launched in 1979, Gray, Peltier and Scibrowsky (2012) found that experiential learning was the second most popular topic and accounted for 15.1% of the articles published in the journal (121 out of a total of 802 articles). Published articles researching the effectiveness of experiential learning, describing experiential learning methods and offering advice to marketing educators interested in adopting experiential learning techniques have also featured in the other principal journals in the field, the *Marketing Education Review* and the *Journal for the Advancement of Marketing Education* (Examples: Greene, 2011; Pollack & Lilly, 2008; Young, Caudill, & Murphy, 2008); in management education journals (Examples: Brennan & Pearce, 2009; Camarero et al., 2010); and occasionally in general marketing journals particularly where a special issue is devoted to marketing education (Examples: Ardley & Taylor, 2010; Harker & Brennan, 2003).

Where marketing educators and researchers mention underlying theories of learning upon which their experiential techniques are based, they refer very largely to Kolb’s experiential learning theory (D. A. Kolb, 1984). Ardley & Taylor (2010) also cite the literature on tacit knowledge, arguing (quite persuasively) that where experiential learning involves real-world

projects students have the opportunity to learn tacit knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. However, one also gets the sense from reading this literature that many marketing educators regard it as a self-evident that learning through experience is desirable, and that additional justification from theories of learning is not entirely necessary. For example, Ganesh & Qin (2009) adopt a largely atheoretical approach to experiential learning, justifying an experience-based approach mainly with the assertion that today's students—the Millennials—expect and need highly engaging experiential learning methods and respond poorly to didactic approaches.

Many of the published studies in this field follow a similar pattern: support for experiential learning is sought from educational theory; the authors describe their implementation of a particular experiential learning method; data (qualitative, quantitative, or both) are gathered from the participating students; the efficacy of the method is shown to be high. The measures used, although varying in detail, tend to concentrate on student satisfaction with the learning process, and student self-reports about how much they believe they learned (perhaps inviting them to mentally compare the experiential exercise with didactic approaches). Learning techniques studied this way include: computer-based sales/marketing simulation games (Bobot, 2010; Ganesh & Qin, 2009; Vos & Brennan, 2010); live marketing projects conducted by students on behalf of real-world businesses (Ardley & Taylor, 2010; Camarero et al., 2010; Inks, Schetzle, & Avila, 2011); the development by students of realistic marketing plans for the launch of a new, viable business venture (Camarero et al., 2010).

All of the studies mentioned in the previous paragraph could inspire the marketing educator to try out something new, with potentially good results. Nevertheless, it often seems that the study was carried out by enthusiasts with a passion for the approach to learning described in their article. Two important unanswered questions suggest themselves: (1) whether these methods would be equally successful when implemented as a routine part of the curriculum by educators with no specific enthusiasm for the approach; (2) whether such approaches to learning would be equally successful if they were widely implemented and simply became the normal way that marketing is taught. In other words, are these experiential approaches as successful as they are reported to be because they implement excellent educational theory, or are they successful because the educator is highly motivated to make them succeed, and the students are intrigued because they are experiencing something new and different?

Something of a warning may have been sounded by two recent articles that cast a critical eye on experiential learning. First, Young and colleagues (2008) sound a note of caution—their empirical study of a Principles of Marketing course showed that, unless students are guided through all four stages of the Kolb learning cycle (concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation; active experimentation), experiential learning activities can result in surface learning rather than deep learning. Experiential learning techniques are not a magic solution, but a tool that has to be incorporated carefully into the learning process if the desired results (such as student critical engagement and deep learning) are to be achieved. Second, Hunter-Jones (2012) describes a real-world, client-based project to develop a marketing strategy for an independent preparatory school that she developed for

final year undergraduate students. Before implementing it, she conducted a focus group to seek the views of some of the students who could choose this optional module:

“All were final year learners and were able to select the course as an option. An outline of the project was given and the opportunities it presented to develop skills, research skills particularly, which could be transferable within different work-based contexts outlined. There was some uncomfortable shuffling around and then one learner commented “to be honest we’re not that interested ... we just want to achieve the best marks possible ... is this going to be possible, or would you suggest taking a course with a normal assignment?”” (Hunter-Jones, 2012:24)

Hunter-Jones emphasises that it was not poorly qualified, disengaged students who expressed such attitudes, but students who had previously been successful and who wanted nothing to stand in the way of achieving further high grades—she calls them “formulaic learners”, who “are less prepared, or even able, to be flexible and accommodating of other learners in case this has a negative influence on their overall mark. They want to be in control of their own achievements and are *formulaic* in achieving this”(Hunter-Jones, 2012:26). Formulaic learners are very capable students who have been through a highly structured learning process at school, and have learned how to be successful within such a learning process. Rather than embracing the excitement and uncertainty of an experiential learning assignment they feel threatened, and may avoid options that involve such experiences.

Two key issues emerge from the work of Hunter-Jones (2012) and of Young et al (2008). First, that there may be growing resistance to experiential learning methods from undergraduate students who have become used to a strongly assessment-driven mode of education at secondary school level. The central proposition is that such students experience negative affect because of the uncertainty they perceive to be associated with the learning and assessment processes of experiential methods; a subsidiary proposition is that students will seek to avoid experiential learning and will choose conventional methods where a choice is available. The second key issue is that experiential methods in marketing education may not lead to deep learning because the *experience* is not converted into genuine *experiential learning* through such processes as reflection and re-conceptualisation. Simply put: “experience in and of itself is not educative ... if students do not think seriously about their experiences, their experiences may reinforce stereotypes and incorrect suppositions” (Young et al., 2008:28).

Now seems a suitable time for marketing educators to reconsider the basics of experiential learning. Experiential methods, once innovative and unusual, may have become such an automatic part of the marketing curriculum that they are considered routine. However, evidence is emerging that certain difficulties are emerging with the application of experiential learning. Perhaps a re-examination of the fundamental principles of experiential learning will cast light on the source of these difficulties.

Probably the best-known contemporary theorist of experiential learning, David Kolb, traces the roots of experiential learning to John Dewey. Dewey conceived of education as the most

fundamental aspect of human society; without education society would be unable to reproduce itself, and experience is considered to be fundamental to learning (Dewey, 1938). Kolb defines experiential learning as: “*the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*” (D. A. Kolb, 1984:38). Kolb’s experiential learning theory (ELT), based on the ideas of Dewey and other twentieth century scholars (such as Lewin, Piaget and Jung) is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Principles of Experiential Learning Theory

1.	Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2.	All learning is relearning; drawing out students’ beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined and integrated with new, more refined ideas.
3.	Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world; reflection/action, and feeling/thinking.
4.	Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; cognition, feeling, perceiving, behaving.
5.	Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6.	Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

(Sources: A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; D. A. Kolb, 1984)

The difficulties associated with applying ELT to marketing education, certainly in contemporary British universities, start with point 1 in Table 1. Recent debate in the *Times Higher* has highlighted the ubiquity of learning outcomes in British universities, the considerable store that university managers set by them, and the contempt in which they are held by many academic staff (Furedi, 2012). Certain other aspects of ELT, as summarised in Table 1, also give pause for thought in the context of teaching marketing in higher education. For example, does it make sense to suppose that learning is “relearning” under these circumstances? No doubt many marketing educators would consider that they are trying to convey an entirely new body of knowledge, and an entirely new way of thinking to their students. In addition, what proportion of marketing educators would agree that “learning is the process of creating knowledge”, and what proportion would agree more with what Kolb and Kolb (2005) call the transmission model—the opposite of experiential learning—where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner?

Before leaving the subject of experiential learning theory, it is important to point out that this paradigm of education has been the subject of considerable criticism from educational researchers: a good summary of the main debates, considering both criticisms and counter-arguments from ELT proponents is provided by Kayes’ (2002). A particular criticism levelled at ELT and other, similar, methods of “instruction using minimal guidance” is that, firstly, the structure of human cognitive architecture is now sufficiently well understood to render the claims of ELT dubious, and that, secondly, the weight of empirical evidence from a large number of studies suggests that minimal guidance methods are neither efficient nor effective learning techniques (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). The principal contention here is that learning can be defined as a change in long-term memory, and that learning from minimally guided experiential learning tasks relies on information being passed to the long-term

memory from the working memory at a time when the individual is engaged in a complex task which imposes a substantial cognitive burden—a process which current knowledge of human cognitive architecture considers to be very inefficient (Kirschner et al., 2006). This point of view has, however, been challenged in the educational psychology literature (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007). Furthermore, Kolb and Kolb (2005) support their own arguments in favour of ELT with reference to work in neuroscience that suggests that the process of experiential learning is related to the process of brain functioning (Zull, 2002). Clearly, the debate about the fundamental educational merits of ELT is a continuing one.

Considerable research evidence exists about experiential learning, both within marketing education and in a wide range of other contexts. The principal conclusion that arises from evaluating this evidence is that marketing educators cannot make a clear and unambiguous presumption in favour of experiential learning. This area of educational theory is contested. The ambiguity in wider evidence and wider debates about the efficacy of experiential learning is also apparent within the marketing academy. Some researchers strongly advocate experiential methods, often with supporting empirical evidence, but usually only with evidence that is compromised in some rather obvious way (for example, student self-reports of increased understanding rather than objective test evidence, small-scale single institution studies, researchers who are advocates for their particular learning method rather than disinterested parties). There are also studies within marketing education that throw doubt on the usefulness of experiential learning. One very important message, however, is that *experience* is not the same thing as *experiential learning*; simply providing students with real-life or simulated experiences of marketing activities is not sufficient to generate experiential learning.

Marketing educators may find that the conditions necessary for successful experiential learning are at odds with wider educational trends which affect policies at their own universities. Experiential learning is holistic and process-orientated, and so may be incompatible with educational policies that are reductionist, purely outcome-orientated, and predominantly instrumental. Attempts to use genuine experiential learning methods in institutions where learning policy is narrowly assessment-driven and learning-outcome focused are likely to prove problematic.

A number of areas for further research suggest themselves. There appear to be contrary reports concerning the learning orientation of the Millennial generation; Ganesh and Qin (2009) report that members of this generation prefer experience-orientated learning methods, while Hunter-Jones (2012) reports that at least some of them are instrumental, and suspicious of experiential learning methods because of the unpredictable assessment outcomes. Several explanations may account for these different observations (for example: one was an American study, the other was a British study; one concerned a simulation game, the other a client-based student project). Certainly there is room for further investigation here. Other research questions not yet answered in the literature concern the routinisation of experiential learning methods, and their delivery by educators who are non-enthusiasts. What happens when experiential learning methods become a standard part of the marketing curriculum and are delivered by staff with no particular interest in the learning technique?

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