

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS TOWARD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES: GENDER DIFFERENCES ON DEEP APPROACHES TO LEARNING, PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND MOTIVATION

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Introduction

Today more than ever students find a pure lecture style teacher- centered format not appealing. They want to be part of their learning experience and enjoy a hands-on approach to learning instead of memorizing concepts and facts (Vito, 2013). Experiential exercises used in marketing classes have been found to not only increase the students' level of involvement in the material, but also contribute to the development of critical thinking skills (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, Munoz & Huser, 2008), better performance on examinations (Hamer 2000; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005), creating appreciation toward the subject (Frontczak, 1998) even among students with different majors (Munoz and Huser, 2008).

This research investigates the impact of deep approaches to learning on acquiring professional skills and on student motivation level in the context of experiential learning. Besides fostering engagement and increasing motivation, it is important that marketing educators take responsibility for the development of students' professional skills. The intense competition for professional positions requires that marketing students graduate with a set of skills that correspond to the demands of the business environment. Additionally, gender differences are explored in the context of these same relationships and experiential learning.

Conceptual Foundation and Hypotheses

Deep approaches to learning refer to the process of understanding the phenomenon as opposed to mere memorization (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Marton and Säljö (1976) identified two broad types of learning outcomes, description-oriented that use surface approaches to learning and conclusion -oriented outcomes. This research concentrates on the latter as conclusion -oriented outcomes are associated with the use of deep learning approaches, focused on critical thinking activities, reflection and elaboration, along with practical application. Experiential assignments create a connection to the external world thus stimulating student interest and enthusiasm, and enhancing learning. As a result, students become aware of the ambiguities and the complexities of real world decision-making (Boyce et al. 2001). As students believe that the knowledge they acquire has a direct practical application, they will be more likely to complete the assignment because it is interesting and/or challenging rather than completing the assignment just for the outcome or reward (Young et al. 2008). In other words, deep approaches to learning occur during and after completion of experiential assignments because they link the material to real-world outcomes and as such increases the intrinsic motivation of the students engaged in the assignment.

H1: An experiential assignment designed with deep approaches to learning will be positively related to intrinsic student motivation.

According to Cunningham (1995) the focus of the marketing education should be less on the transmission of fundamental marketing knowledge and more on the development of skills. Educators have been looking for ways to bridge the gap between the professional skills required by employers and the ones taught in the classroom. One tool to achieve this is by bringing real world situations into the classroom and by providing the opportunity for more experiential

activities. It is proffered that if the assignment can provide a clear link to professional skill development, the motivational level will be stronger. Generally, student motivation for experiential activities is high because they help students experience direct application of skills and concepts learned in the classroom setting (Gillentine & Schulz 2001).

H2: Professional skills acquired as a result of an experiential assignment will be positively related to intrinsic student motivation.

It is further expected that a carefully planned experiential assignment will allow the student to engage in “real-world,” practical activities that facilitate deep approaches to learning. Therefore as a result of the assignment:

H3: Professional skills acquired as a result of an experiential assignment will be positively related to deep approaches to learning

Evidence of gender differences in learning styles (Gallos, 1993) and preferred learning activities (Garber & Clopton, 2002; Hawtry, 2007; Kaenzig, Hyatt & Anderson, 2007) among business students suggest differences may in fact exist. Given the increase in experiential learning and activities in the business and marketing curriculum in particular it is important to understand if deep approach to learning differs by gender. Analysis of gender difference may impact the planning, design, and implementation of experiential learning and the associated stages of learning.

H4: Gender differences exist in an experiential assignment designed with deep approaches to learning and intrinsic student motivation.

H5: Gender differences exist in professional skills acquired as a result of an experiential assignment and intrinsic student motivation and deep approach to learning.

Methodology

A survey questionnaire was created based on the Young et al. (2008) study and the Seleb scale (Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen, 2006) and some items were modified to measure the relationships among three constructs. This study administered a web-survey designed to measure students' perceptions toward marketing CEC activities. Data were collected from a college in Northeast using a convenience sampling method.

Data Analysis

First, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was run to assess the measurement properties of the scales. Several items with factor loadings lower than 0.6 were deleted and a 3-factor solution of 13 items was identified. The EFA solution accounted for 75.4% of the cumulative variance. All measures demonstrate good reliability with alpha values of .93, .87, and .89.

Next, the overall validity of the measurement model was tested using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Results indicate an acceptable fit for the data with $\chi^2 = 127.30$, $df = 62$, $CMIN = 2.06$, $p\text{-value} = .000$, $CFI = .96$, $RMSEA = .079$, and $TLI = .95$. The CFI and TLI exceed the recommended cut-off value of 0.9 and the RMSEA is lower than the cut-off value of 0.08. Further, construct validity and discriminant validity were evaluated based on the factor loading estimates, construct reliabilities, variance extracted percentages and inter-construct correlations (Hair et al., 2006). The results indicate that the convergent validity of the model is supported and good reliability is established.

Prior to any comparisons of the relationships between the variables, metric invariance between male and female was examined. The results from the constrained and the unconstrained model suggested that full metric invariance was established.

Finally, the CFA analyses included a test of scalar invariance. Since full scalar invariance was supported, partial scalar invariance was examined. Thus, valid factor mean comparison could be made for all factors.

The SEM structural path results reveal that the relationships among the constructs are positive and significant as predicted. The estimated causal relations are evaluated according to the size of the standardized coefficients (β). The SEM structural paths show that not all constructs were positively related in both samples. The relationship between deep approaches to learning and professional skills was significantly related to each other in both the male and female samples (β : 54 vs 47). Also, professional skills is significantly related to motivation in both groups; Male ($\beta = .80$, $t = 5.95$) and female ($\beta = .59$, $t = 4.88$). However, deep approaches was significantly related to motivation for females ($\beta = .27$, $t = 2.53$), but there is no significant relationship between deep approaches and motivation for males.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that even low-stake experiential activities should be designed carefully so that marketing students believe that they enhance their professional skills and real-world experience. Students identified experiential activities they deemed to be “the best” but these activities also seemed to induce students to work hard by increasing their intrinsic motivation. Students perceived that they were learning more and they also enjoyed the process of learning. Therefore, if it is not already clear, professors can include in the description of the assignment explicit references to how each activity is linked to practical application and how it leads to developing specific skills. However, it seems like practical application is more relevant for female marketing students than for male students. This research warrants further exploration as to why this is the case and on how to improve the motivation of male students by studying what other aspects of the experiential learning are important.

Conclusion

This research provides empirical evidence of the student perceptions toward the experiential activities. When asked about “the best experiential marketing assignment,” students believe that it fosters deep approach to learning and enhances their professional skills, for female students these two factors seems to increase intrinsic motivation to perform the activities associated with the assignment, while for male students only professional skills are positively related to motivation.

References Available upon Request