USE WRITING TO GENERATE STUDENT THINKING WHEN TEACHING MARKETING PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

During the past decade, a great deal of energy has gone into developing strategies that enhance teaching effectiveness and promote more active student learning. Marketing educators have responded quickly to the need for new strategies in education and have developed innovative approaches which reinforce the traditional textbook reading and lecture design. This paper describes the author's involvement in one such innovation, a principles of marketing course which is structured as a writing course. The intent of course design is to change the student's role from one of passive involvement to that of an actively involved writer/participant/teacher.

Introduction and Purpose

Last Summer we were halfway through a Principles of Marketing course that I was teaching using a modified version of writing pedagogy. The students were supposed to be learning through a series of "thinking" assignments that involve the extended use of writing and computer word processing. One morning I started off the class by commenting, "This morning's headline reads: 'Mississippi drinks in profits from liquor sales.' The article goes on to mention that the State netted $22.9 million on $111.7 million in wholesale liquor sales during the fiscal year 1989. Does anyone have any comments?"

The class, which had been highly motivated and responsive just sat and looked at me. No one even seemed interested. Somewhat irritably I said, "You know, if I had asked you to write your comments you would have ... " My mind clicked products. "That's what you are supposed to be doing, helping them think and learn. Ask them to freewrite on the subject instead of leading them to where you think they should go!" I apologized for starting to snap at them and asked the class to take 10 minutes and write their thoughts about the newspaper article. The ensuing discussion involved the class's perceptions of the societal tradeoffs that are involved when marketing what Kotler (1988) calls "un wholesomeness products." More importantly, the discussion was lively and dominated by the students. My attempt to revert to a traditional lecture style with limited class discussion had been aborted through a change in teaching method that constitutes one response to the many calls for a new vitality in education.

This past decade has been a period of extraordinary self-reflection in higher education. It has been a period in which a great deal of energy has gone into developing strategies for teaching more effectively and for promoting more active learning on the part of students. These strategies are documented in several major studies included those conducted by the National Institute of Education (1984), Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1987), and the Association of American Colleges (1985 and 1988). Marketing educators have been quick to respond to the need for new approaches in education, particularly in the principles of marketing course. Peterson (1989), for example, has called for more depth in the principles offering and suggests that instructors use methods which "reinforce the traditional textbook reading and lecture approach."

This paper describes the author's involvement in a principles of marketing course that is structured as a writing (W) course. The intent of course design is to change the student's role from one of passive involvement to that of an actively involved writer/participant/teacher. Hopefully, the author's experience with the course will be useful to marketing educators at other institutions who may be considering the use (or increased use) of writing pedagogy when teaching marketing principles.

Millsaps College

Millsaps College is located in Jackson, Mississippi and was founded in 1890 by the Methodist Church. As a liberal arts college, Millsaps seeks to give the student adequate breadth and depth of understanding of civilization and culture. The curriculum is designed to avoid premature specialization and to integrate the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences for their mutual enrichment. The College has most recently recognized for excellence in liberal arts was installation of the Mississippi Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in March, 1989. Moreover, the Eby School of Management is currently in the process of obtaining AACSB accreditation.

"New and Improved" Course Structure

The author does not intend to imply that the use of writing to enhance student thinking has been neglected by marketing educators. Textbook publishers have generously furnished a variety of learning aids to those who adopt their texts including study guides, microcomputer-assisted self instruction programs, casebooks, simulations, and marketing videotapes. Most of us have used several or all of the aids to foster student creativity and understanding. Therefore, a restructuring of the marketing principles course in the W format can at best result in a "new and improved" course. However, the author's experience with the format suggests that it can greatly stimulate the student's interest in marketing and improve the instructor's interaction with the class.

The most significant difference between the W marketing principles offering and the traditional offering is course structure. Millsaps College has institutionalized writing pedagogy by incorporating it within core curriculum requirements. Moreover, instructors who teach W courses must complete a writing workshop and be designated as W instructors by the College. These actions have helped eliminate the possibility that the institution's commitment to writing pedagogy will be short lived.

The second significant difference is that the instructor does not read or grade student writing in the traditional manner; the concern is with what the student is trying to say and the emphasis is on generative learning. This means that the instructor must overlook incorrect grammar and spelling and concentrate on marketing content and process. It should be noted, however, that the students enrolled in a W course have been well prepared in English and must complete a writing proficiency examination before being eligible to enroll in a W course.

The Writing Workshop

A Ford Foundation grant enabled Millsaps College to establish a series of writing (W) courses that address one major aspect of its mission: "to integrate the humanities, the social studies, and the natural sciences for their mutual enrichment."

Additional course writing assignments will not motivate students to become more actively involved or accelerate their progress toward higher order thinking and writing. To achieve this outcome, teachers must assume the new role...
of active guide/facilitator/traveler/participant. Moreover, students must assume the role of actively involved traveler/participant/teacher. The radical difference between the new and traditional approaches is that the W teacher must develop courses that are custom fitted to a specific discipline, teacher, and the developmental needs of the students. This requires additional instructor training which Millaps takes the form of a writing workshop.

College Faculty who teach writing courses are required to attend an intensive two-week workshop lead by the Director of the Writing Program. The Director is assisted by other faculty members who previously participated in the workshop and have taught a W course. The workshop is a role reversal for the soon to be W course teacher who becomes the student.

The workshop leaders provide few answers to questions since they reject the teacher's traditional role. Early in the workshop, this role rejection is disturbing to many individuals who are not ready to accept the new methodology. This discomfort is eased for most participants as the workshop progresses.

The workshop includes activities such as freewriting, writing-thinking notebooks, participation in writing groups, active listening, process writing, journals, and discussions. The level of trust among most participants gradually increases to a level of open discussion of issues which individuals feel are either not being addressed or are not being addressed satisfactorily. Among these issues are grading/evaluation, syllabus/course design, sacrifice of course content in the W format, and how to make the W format work. The level of anxiety on these and other issues is not minimized for many of the workshop participants and rightfully so. If the leaders suggest answers, they defeat the workshop's purpose -- to help the trainees realize what education is and is not. Education is not accomplished when the teacher sets the environment where success is regurgitation of materials presented and read. Rather education is accomplished when the teacher sets the environment which encourages the student to discover and move beyond the course content. The author tried to keep this philosophy in mind when developing the W marketing management course.

Examples of Student/Instructor Exchanges

The principles of marketing course revolves around the Pride & Farrell (1989) textbook model which depicts the buyer, marketing mix, and environmental variables. Students (classes are limited to 15) must relate course activities to the model and eventually give examples of how their comments and findings relate to marketing practice. Before they can relate their activities to marketing, the instructor must guide them into discussions of the text through writing assignments. Two of these, unfocused and focused freewriting, are very useful in achieving this outcome.

Unfocused freewriting is popular with the students once the instructor provides feedback that relates student comments to theory and practice. It is very useful when introducing the course and gives the instructor practice that can be used to foster rapport. An example of unfocused freewriting is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Example of Unfocused Student Freewriting

| Assignment: Take all of the rules you know about writing and set them aside. For the next 5 minutes write with only two rules: don't stop and don't edit (everything in your mind goes on the paper). |
| Student: I'm sitting here wondering how I use marketing. I sell myself. I teach tennis to put myself through school. I have gone to several different clubs in Jackson and I have had to try to create interest where there often was none. Sometimes I have been successful and sometimes I have not. I recently failed in Brandon at a club in a different area known as Crossgates. I don't think I was original in my manner of recruitment. I tried to use standard techniques that I had used in South or Northeast Jackson. I also think that I failed in the timing. Because of this I took a financial loss and had to totally reevaluate. |

Instructor: We'll be able to put your experience into focus as the course develops. You've hit on two very important aspects of marketing: satisfying customer needs and timing marketing actions. Many businesses fail because they try to market a product to the wrong group at the wrong time. A question: Is selling yourself the same as marketing yourself?

The student's response as shown in Table 1 was useful when the instructor gave an overview of the course and outlined the textbook model. The student took a course of action based on what he thought was needed and without regard to customer needs. The text warns against this tendency and states that marketers should always consider customer needs when developing marketing programs. Subsequent class commentary lead to a discussion of the marketing concept, evolution of the concept, and the roles that timing and luck play in business strategy.

Before the complete textbook model of marketing could be examined, more student input was needed. This was gathered through focused freewriting exercises such as that shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Example of Focused Student Freewriting

| Assignment: Imagine that you are a customer at a shopping mall where you have shopped in the past. Take 5 minutes and describe what is going on at the mall. (Note: The instructor circled the words that are bracketed below.) |
| Student: [People] are walking by the [window displays] and [looking at] the [merchandise]. Stores like [the Gap] always seem to have [young people] in looking at the [clothes] which don't seem to change that much. It's the [music] that attracts them. When I walk through the major [department stores] past the cologne, there always seems to be people looking at the colognes. Surely [these people] don't buy cologne everyday because they don't smell that good. The display is [laid out] with [ neat little gifts] you can get if you [buy] some cologne. What strikes me is the [amount of flash] a store has is proportional to the [price] they want for those items. |

Instructor: The instructor wrote a term or comment above each of the bracketed words. At the end he listed the following "key terms": market, target market, promotion, product, inventory, style, fashion, atmospherics, department store, conventional department store, premium, store image, price, purchasers and users, exchange, consumers, consumer decision process. These are terms that are covered throughout the text and the student in effect provided her own text overview. At the bottom of the page the instructor wrote: "Not bad -- you've covered half the book already." He also asked two questions: (1) "Do you suppose that the people looking at the colognes were looking for gifts to give to people who do smell good?" and (2) Is the person who purchases a product the only one who has an influence on the purchase decision process?"

Note that in both the unfocused and focused freewriting exercises, the instructor did not provide specific answers. Instead he suggested a direction for inquiry and
some questions which would hopefully lead the student in that direction. Most students did not wait for future discussions before responding to questions that the instructor posed during the unfocused and focused freewriting exercises. Instead, they presented potential answers to the questions and/or asked the instructor for additional guidance after they had tried to find "answers" in the text. They started to read more and they started to think and analyze at a deeper level. This outcome has been consistent regardless of the type of exercise used.

About three weeks into the course, the instructor assigns the first of a series of "synopsis and observation" exercises that permit the student to relate a current event, book, or article to course material. The intent is to show students that the course model is helpful when analyzing marketing events that occur during our everyday lives. The topics are taken from periodicals that are published throughout the semester and assigned by the instructor throughout the course. Students must summarize each article using a word processing program and computer printer and relate it to the textbook model and class discussions. Table 3 contains a typical student input. Note the simplicity of the student's remarks and the excitement that she felt when preparing the exercise.

Table 3 Example of a Student Synopsis and Observation

ARTICLE:  
"1990 census to count more than just heads," The Clarion-Ledger, (Jackson, Mississippi), September 10, 1989, pp. 1A, 15A.

SYNOPSIS:

The 1990 census is bigger and better than ever. The census workers will fan out into the home lives and backgrounds than in the past. Questions on income, family, and race will be critical. The population figures help the government distribute federal funds, estimate social services, and determine legislative districts.

In the family area, they want to know if the children living in the home are natural born, adopted, step-children, or grandchildren. This will help find out more information on divorce, cohabitation, remarriage, and single parents.

They have rephrased the question "Who is the head of the household?" for "Who is the householder?" The awareness of the women's movement has reached all areas.

The income section now categorizes income by age, sex, and race. They have also raised the income ceiling to include $150,000 and higher.

In the age and race section, they expect to find more people of Asian and Pacific Island descent living in Mississippi, but they still believe that we are generally a Black and White state. The age category will extend to 85 and up. This could mean more federally funded programs for the elderly in Mississippi.

There will be a state-wide promotional campaign to help ensure the success of the census. Many people do not realize that the census is a mandatory part of the constitution.

OBSERVATION:

This is a very enlightening article. Marketers should just love all the information that this new and improved census will bring to them. They will be able to figure out exactly who to market their products to and what the variables are in certain markets. The census will help a lot in the areas of demographic and geographic variables of the market.

At first I couldn't figure out why we were reading an article on the census, but as I read Chapter 3 in the Pride and Farrell text, it all made sense.

I guess this census information would also help in forecasting market sales potential. That could be a tremendous help to operating managers who have to figure out just how much to produce.

If I were a marketer, I would definitely be looking forward to all this new information about our country and potential customers.

I thought it was interesting also that the State in going to "market" the census itself. They want full participation and that takes advertising and appealing to the people. Marketing is everywhere!

Many other types of exercises are used in the marketing principles writing course. Examples are written analyses of audio and video marketing tapes furnished by the textbook publisher, journal preparation, unstructured written case analyses, and portfolio preparation. Each is weighted heavily when the instructor evaluates student learning outcomes.

Student Grading and Instructor Evaluation

Technical course content is measured through three examinations that cover textbook material. Written exercises are placed in a writing portfolio which the instructor grades during the final week of the course. The examinations constitute 80% of the student's final grade and the portfolio 20%. The final 10% of each student's grade, the instructor's evaluation, is often used to reward those who started slowly and advanced throughout the course.

When grading the portfolios, the instructor looks for patterns and trends. He asks, for example, "Has the student concentrated on each exercise and attempted to reason out responses? Has she/he responded to the instructor's questions in a positive manner? Has the student related responses to the course model and previous discussions/current readings?"

The instructor is evaluated by the students using an instrument provided by Millsaps College. This instrument has two items that are particularly useful when tracking the progress of both the instructor and the students. These are (1) stimulation of the student's interest in the subject, and (2) quality of the teacher's interaction with the class (Table 4).

Table 4 Student Instructor and Course Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 1</th>
<th>(Stimulation of your (student's) interest in the subject)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Semester Course and Section</td>
<td>Student Rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1987 Admin 321 (1)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1987 Admin 321 (2)</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 1988 Admin 321 (0)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 1989 Admin 321 (0)</td>
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<td>Spring 1989 Admin W321 (0)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1989 Admin 321 (0)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55
Table 4 summarizes my performance to date when teaching Principles of Marketing in the traditional manner (Admin 321) and as a writing course (Admin W321). Since completing the writing workshop and teaching my first W class, my instructor evaluations have been significantly higher. This could be due to the fact that I started employing more student writing in my courses regardless of their designation. Although it’s too early to conclude that the writing pedagogy is superior to the traditional approach, these data suggest that the method has great potential.

Summary

This paper describes the author’s involvement in a principles of marketing course that is structured as a writing (W) course. The intent of course design is to change the student’s role from one of passive involvement to that of an actively involved traveler/participant/teacher.

The author does not intend to imply that the use of writing to enhance student thinking has been neglected by marketing educators. Textbook publishers have generously furnish a variety of learning aids to those who adopt their texts including study guides, microcomputer-assisted self instruction programs, casebooks, simulations, and marketing videotapes. Most of us have used several or all of the aids to increase the quality and quantity of our presentations. Therefore, a restructuring of the marketing principles course in the W format can at best result in a “new and improved” course. However, the author’s experience with the format suggests that it can greatly stimulate the student’s interest in marketing and improve the instructor’s interaction with the class.

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Benefits have accrued to the college, the instructors, and most importantly to the students. For example the college has generated a “community of writers” that has