

Can marketing research be exciting? Advances in project based learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a pedagogical approach to marketing research – an oft required and not desired course for marketing undergraduate students. Marketing research can become a mundane and not-exciting topic of marketing compared to it's siblings of consumer behavior, social media, advertising, and the like. However, incorporating the approach of Project Based Learning can changes perceptions – of both students and instructors – on the outlook and interest in marketing research courses.

For several years, the marketing research course discussed in this paper underwent a transition from a traditional lecture and data course to an application-based project course. This paper seeks to give insight into the backgrounds of marketing research and its necessity in programs, an introduction and summary of project-based learning, and a veritable road map where the reader can take this article and easily apply it to their own classrooms. A sample of a 16-week semester schedule is provided, as are student comments on this process, along with ideas for adapting additional courses into the project-based format.

Keywords: project based learning, research, marketing, pedagogy, experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

Traditional pedagogical approaches in face-to-face teaching focus on the professor while students passively learn through a one-way information flow from teacher to student (Flumerfelt & Green, 2013; Sahin et al., 2015; Shih and Tsai, 2017). Harris (2016) states that traditional education formats are structured as misrepresentations of reality where students do not have the opportunity to gain practical knowledge. Due in part to these traditional approaches, students may not enter a marketing research or similar class with hopes of learning. To address this decline in excitement while increasing quality and learning efficiency (Shih and Tsai, 2017), marketing professors can implement a Project Based Learning (PBL) approach (Albert, 2019).

PBL activities help students understand the importance of marketing decisions with strategic processes and content (Siegel, 2000). A marketing research PBL course goes far beyond course lectures and enters a world of appreciation, application, and critical thinking. Through PBL, students apply what they learn in an authentic real-world setting for a real business, further developing their creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills (Rohm et al., 2021). The adoption of PBL courses in marketing research will help to solidify the role of business courses in helping industry respond to changes in the marketplace (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2020).

THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

The goal of business school professors is to ensure students are prepared to be contributing members to society once they leave the university setting (Smith & Gibson, 2016; Vande Wiele et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2017). Implementing a formal PBL pedagogical approach will help the student bridge the gap from textbook recitation to well-adjusted employee in their first professional career opportunity.

The modification of a traditional class to PBL can be daunting for both professor and students. There must be a willingness from all involved to fully adopt and accept this approach and be flexible with the outcome, or, be ready for the course, projects, grades, and student evaluations to suffer. A PBL class is not concerned with a student's ability to master memorization of facts, theories, and key vocabulary terms. Instead, marketing research PBL is concerned with a student's ability to critically think through their identified marketing problem and apply what was discussed in class to solve this marketing problem. This is a departure for the professor and students alike – the class is no longer focused on a professor who controls the one way information flow. The entire success or failure of the course is joined to the semester long group project. The student's ability to adapt, interact, communicate, and contribute to the success of their team sets the foundation for their performance in the grade column.

The delivery of a PBL class is much different than a traditional project class. In PBL, the semester is divided into two distinct halves. The first half is dedicated to instruction – where the theory and processes of marketing research are delivered in a fast-paced and participatory series of lectures. Students are required to prepare before each session by reviewing slides and reading the necessary course material. The second half of the semester is completely dedicated to structured group work in the classroom and group meetings with the professor.

Dividing the class into two halves, focusing on the importance of application, and letting students stumble, followed by real time teaching moments, allows for students to be more prepared to enter the workforce. The innovative PBL process is a proven method to bring in

applicable real-world skills beyond textbook memorization to enrich the student learning experience (Smith & Gibson, 2016; Vande Wiele et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2017). At the semester conclusion, students are encouraged to add this project under work experience on their resume and provide hiring personnel with copies of the report (with confidential information of the client removed) so the employer can get a sense of the individual's ability to produce quality work.

THE MARKETING RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

The PBL approach enriches marketing research material since students have a sense of ownership in learning and applying the material. The students understand they are doing a project for a reason – to assist a local business owner – instead of working with sample data sets and mock focus groups. The addition of PBL allows students to implement the formal marketing research processes immediately. Student teams are responsible for every step of the marketing research process – from identifying and justifying a marketing problem supported with secondary research, identifying the target market of consumers for the client, conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups to set the foundation and uncover key items which need further exploration, survey development, quantitative data collection, data cleanup and analysis, interpreting the results, and presenting marketing recommendations based on their research to the client in oral presentations at the conclusion of the semester.

Marketing research courses are ideal for the PBL approach. The ability to understand and comprehend the material is increased when students have the chance to work with data they collect to assist a real business. The application of the course material to the real business allows students to understand the value of the course for their semester and career goals.

THE PBL APPROACH

The process of incorporating the PBL approach into marketing research (or any other course) requires the addition of new ideas and deletion of traditional classroom practices. This section will outline how each half of the marketing research PBL class is conducted, highlighting key components along the way.

In a traditional class, many students expect the first day of the semester to be syllabus day, however expectations will change in a marketing research PBL class. The class uses a condensed schedule completing instruction in eight weeks, necessitating the use of all class time allotted. After reviewing of the syllabus, the instructor should take time to explain the PBL process and what students should expect. The class is structured as a research agency, with the professor as the director and students as associates. It is their job glean information from the professor, ask questions, and get to the bottom of what they should focus on in class. At this point, students may be uncomfortable because they are not use to this type of class. This is okay and expected. Explain that the professor and students will work together to discover what they need to do – to trust the process and they will have a quality report in a few short months.

Next, introductions to groups begins. Students take two adapted Meyers-Briggs personality tests, and the class has open discussions about introverts and extroverts; perceivers and judgers. This discussion helps to break the ice in the class, lighten the atmosphere, and open the door for open engagement for all students. Each personality type gets to ask the other questions. Every semester looks familiar – the extroverts want to know why the introverts do not talk, and the introverts want to know why extroverts will not stop talking. According to the

introverts, they do not speak because the extroverts do not stop speaking – there is no space in the conversation for them. And why do the extroverts not stop talking? According to the extroverts, they do not like awkward silences in the group or class and will say whatever is top of mind to fill the void in the conversation because the introverts are obviously not talking. The same exercise is then done for the perceivers and judgers. This entire discussion allows all students to see the other side's point of view, building a level of acceptance and understanding on how the other side thinks and operates.

Then, the class self-chooses teams of four with only one rule. A female student is not allowed to be on a team with three male students, because inevitably she will fill the traditional secretary role for the team and this is not beneficial to anyone. After group formation, the teams assign formal roles (project manager, editor, archivist, and designer). Then, each team formally drafts a team charter. The purpose of this signed document is to outline the expectations for team meetings, communication, deadlines, and penalties for not following the team's set policy.

The remainder of the first half of the semester then falls into a very fast paced series of lectures. Students take notes which they will reference when the second half of the semester begins. For the next few weeks while lectures are ongoing, teams will work on identifying and justifying the marketing research problem they want to focus on. The students choose what they want to research, which must be approved by the client and myself based on the team's ability to justify the importance of their idea.

The second half of class is devoted to group work on the project. At the dividing point between the halves, the first major deliverable is due – the front end of the marketing research report. Encourage students to not proofread this report – the report should be in rough draft form. Worrying about proofreading now can stifle student creativity. Use a class session to review the midterm with each team pulling each group out of class for a 5-to-10-minute meeting. Hand the paper back, show them the score, then walk the group through what they should improve when preparing for the final report. Start with the lowest scoring team first, then send them back to the classroom with the rest of teams, and this cycle repeats until the final team, who scored the highest, returns to the classroom following our meeting.

Then return to the classroom where the professor is likely met with angry stares and frustrated emotions. Little direction has been given on the report to this point by design, and the grades may be lower than expected by students. Explain that when they have a job, their boss is not going to provide them detailed written instructions on how to complete a task. They must be comfortable being proactive in asking for guidance along the way. Inevitably, the teams that perform the best are the teams who communicate with the professor early and often on the project. The teams who perform poorly are those who never make contact. Make an arrangement with the class – take the recommendations seriously and resubmit their improved mid-term report by a certain date. If a team makes the corrections and improves their work, adjust their grades accordingly.

The second half of the semester also sees class sessions where each team presents a deliverable, and the other groups will provide warm and cool comments for feedback. Warm comments are things the team did well, and cool comments are opportunities for improvement. This exercise represents two main advantages. First, teams receive actional feedback they can use to improve their project. Second, the entire class benefits from learning how to comfortably give and receive constructive criticism.

On the surface, taking a class and teaching for only eight weeks of the semester sounds like it will reduce the workload of the professor. The fact is that a PBL course will increase the

amount of work the faculty member is responsible for. The professor must grade and provide reviews of multiple reports at multiple points in the semester, act as moderator when a group becomes dysfunctional, spend time outside of class meeting with teams, and the list goes on. The PBL class is rigorous for student and professor – and if you are not able to increase your workload then evaluate your commitment to PBL. This pedagogical approach is not for everyone – it works well for marketing research classes and is enjoyable. A proposed 16 week outline is shown in Table 1 (Appendix).

ENHANCING SKILLS

Students will gain business function skills and soft skills in a marketing research PBL course (Smith & Gibson, 2016). The first skills are typically marketing specific as students will gain a very thorough understanding of the marketing research process. They will live this process, be involved in every step of the research, and in many cases do each step of the process more than once. They will see an increase in the personal confidence to take on large scale research projects and to synthesize and solve complex marketing problems.

The second set of skills are life skills, and students will learn how to be a contributing member of a team and company. After the class, students understand the value of active communication. From communicating with their teammates through the course, communicating with the instructor, to giving and receive feedback students will realize that the best practice for avoiding negative situations is to maintain open lines of communication with the people who depend on them and the people who the students depend on.

This combined set of skills makes a well-rounded individual who is more prepared to enter the workforce than they were prior to the class. Professors are merely the conduits which information flows. The PBL approach gives students the information and experience they need to make an impact immediately.

THE PBL DIFFERENCE

As discussed above, the PBL approach in marketing research brings more experience and application to the student than the traditional class. PBL courses have a formal structure which contains a series of seven project design elements to be followed to ensure the consistency of delivery and learning outcomes. The design elements shown in Table 2 (Appendix) are adapted from The Buck Institute of Education (2022).

There is a stream of literature showing the benefit of a PBL approach in the classroom across a variety of academic disciplines (Albert, 2019; Kakalejčík & Palová, 2019; Kwietniewski, 2017; Rohm et al., 2021; Shih & Tsai, 2017; Siegel, 2000; Vande Wiele et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2017). It is time to make the PBL pedagogy a mainstay in the design and instruction of marketing research courses. The fit for this union is natural and innovative – students learn the formal marketing research process with a purpose of assisting a local business, which benefits all involved.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PBL

Student evaluations of the course comment on how valuable the experience was. They feel prepared for their career after graduation. Students come full circle – on day one they did not

like the class because of the work load and lack of direction, but at the end of class they understand the process and are thankful to have taken part in the course. The student comments shown in Table 3 (Appendix) are excerpts from marketing research courses after PBL implementation:

Another tool that is used in the PBL class is a weekly peer evaluation. This peer evaluation requires that each member of the team is assigned a percentage of total group work for the week. For example, a team of four students who distribute the workload evenly would each complete 25 percent of the team's work for that week. Teams take a blank pie chart and assign each member their slice of the work for the week, listing their percentage of all team work completed for the week and a list of the items each person worked on. Then each team member must acknowledge their agreement with the weeks percentages by signing the document prior to the team uploading it to an assignment folder. This process helps students become more comfortable in uncomfortable situations – basing the quality and quantity of their own work against their peers. This also serves as an accountability system so each team member knows where they stand in relation to their teammates.

ADAPTING PBL TO OTHER COURSES

PBL is adaptable to a variety of marketing courses. PBL has been implemented in brand management, consumer behavior, and digital marketing among others. In these different classes, students complete a semester long project resulting in brand recommendations for a local business or helping a local business better understand their target market of consumers. Students will complete their reports based on secondary research or a very limited survey with reporting done via frequency analysis or clustering.

The key point for transitioning your class to the formal PBL approach is formatting lectures to only 8 weeks of instruction, work with a local business as the client, give students the power to fail, and ensure students are owners of their outcomes. The formal PBL approach is a powerful and proven approach to the classroom, and students in these classes make the transition from student to marketer over the length of a semester.

PBL is well-tested pedagogical approach validated across numerous disciplines. Additionally, previous work shows the value that PBL offers in a variety of marketing classes. The importance of PBL cannot be denied. What is lacking in the PBL knowledge however is a road map that instructors can use to adapt PBL into their own course. Nowhere is this needed more than the instruction of marketing research. Incorporating PBL with marketing research will have a positive impact on students, the local business community, and the instructor.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Suggested 16 Week Course Schedule for Marketing Research PBL
 Items in **bold** represent milestone deadlines for the project

Week	Content
Week 1	Course Intro, PBL Basics, Grouping
Week 2	Group roles and organization Client intake meeting in class
Week 3	Marketing Research Process Define the Problem Research Objective
Week 4	Research Design Secondary Research Qualitative Research Team Problem Statement Due
Week 5	Quantitative Research Review survey software Understanding measurement, develop questions, design the instrument
Week 6	Select and determine sample size Fieldwork and data issues SPSS 1
Week 7	SPSS 2 Writing up results Team Midterm Report Due Team Survey Launch
Week 8	Team midterm report review with professor
Week 9	Team proposal slide presentation with warm and cool comments
Week 10	Team work day Methodology section complete Data collection complete
Week 11	Teams 1-5 meetings with professor
Week 12	Teams 1-6 meetings with professor
Week 13	Team data presentations with warm and cool comments
Week 14	Team work day Team Final Reports Due
Week 15	Team presentation practice with warm and cool comments
Week 16	Final presentations to client

Table 2: Key design elements of PBL

PBL Design Element	Description
Challenging Problem or Question	A problem to investigate and solve using their knowledge being created in the class
Sustained Inquiry	The project should be an in depth research process more than merely looking the topic up – requires formal research steps
Authenticity	Authentic projects have measurable impacts on others – such as the class client for the semester – the project is “real” for students
Student Voice and Choice	Having a say in the project and the formation of the problem gives students ownership, and therefore care more about the project
Reflection	Students, and professor, should reflect throughout the semester on what, how, and why they are learning this research process
Critique and Revision	Students are taught how to give and receive feedback from their peers, and to receive and revise the project based on the professor’s and client’s feedback
Public Product	The final product goes beyond the walls of the classroom. Special guests attend presentations, including the client and a special guest from the university (Department chair, dean, president, etc)

Table 3: Marketing Research PBL Student Evaluation Comments

<i>“This class stretched my thinking immensely. Going into the course, I had very slim to none previous knowledge on the topic and not only do I feel confident in what I learned, I feel confident that I can apply it.”</i>	<i>“The project was great! A lot of work but I really really enjoyed it and felt it incorporated a lot of what we learned. I also loved that we are helping a local company. It makes it so much more meaningful that I am actually putting my time and effort toward a project that is making a difference in a local business”</i>
<i>“The class was intellectually stimulating and stretched my thinking because I applied it to real life situations and how I can use this material for my future job.”</i>	<i>“Working with the business community in hopes of solving a marketing problem was beneficial to my learning. For the first time I could envision myself doing marketing related work outside of the classroom.”</i>
<i>“ There was enough guidance provided to help but little enough to make you struggle a little bit and force you to learn. Such a tough combination to work with but the help:struggle ratio was perfect.”</i>	<i>“I learned a lot more by helping an actual client from our town, it meant that our research was actually valuable beyond just for a grade. It pushed me to try harder and do a better job because of it. We were presented with the ability to choose what marketing problem we wanted”</i>