Introducing an entrepreneurial marketing course into university curriculum: Lessons learned & future direction

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ABSTRACT

Most would agree that marketing is integral to the successful creation and ongoing performance of new business ventures. Not[VL1][DP2] surprisingly, universities have begun incorporating entrepreneurial marketing (EM) courses into their marketing and/or entrepreneurship programs. However, course content and delivery appear to share little in common within different institutional settings and there does not appear to be consensus in the literature regarding the nature and application of EM instruction within tertiary education. This research examines the experience of an EM course that was introduced into the marketing curriculum at a large university in Australia. Focus group methodology was adopted with a sample of 40 undergraduate marketing students who were enrolled in the first course. Results reveal that students had a positive attitude to the concept of the course but there appeared to be perceived skill development deficiencies with content delivery and assessment. A well-considered, practical, and experiential delivery/learning method should be utilized where possible to be successful.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial marketing, education, entrepreneurship, teaching, university curriculum

INTRODUCTION

While marketing and entrepreneurship have traditionally been regarded as two distinct fields of study, research suggests that marketing functions are critically important to new business ventures (Sadiku-Dushi et al. 2019; Stokes, 2000). The concept of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) was first introduced in the early 1980s as academics attempted to develop its distinction and definition (Morris, Schindehutte, & LaForge, 2002). It is often connected with marketing activities in small-to-medium-sized firms (SMEs) which typically have limited resources, and to compete with larger companies it was essential for these smaller firms to use creative, surprising and often low-cost methods. EM applies elements of traditional marketing strategy (customer focus, resource leveraging) and combines entrepreneurial dimensions, such as innovation, calculated risk-taking and pro-activeness (among others) that provide value (Hisrich & Ramadani, 2017; Morris et al., 2002).

A frequently used EM definition suggests EM is the "proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities for acquiring and retaining profitable customers through innovative approaches to the risk management, resource leveraging and value creation." (Morris et al., 2002 p.4). It can be said that EM lies at the intersection of marketing and entrepreneurship, intertwining aspects of each discipline where firms act entrepreneurially with their marketing decisions (Collinson, Shaw & Warner, 2002). However, as the literature suggests and as is discovered in this research, a clear communication and conceptualization of EM is useful for further pedagogical progress to be made (Togharee et al., 2017).

BACKGROUND

EM offers businesses innovative and creative methods to market products particularly in highly uncertain economic conditions. These methods can differ from traditional marketing theories and include areas such as guerrilla marketing, ambush marketing, buzz marketing, disruptive marketing and viral marketing (Hisrich & Ramadani, 2018). Increasing market uncertainty and limited resources created needs and opportunities for small and large firms regarding EM, and researchers began questioning the validity of classic large-firm marketing theories that are unable to be transferred to new venture marketing many years ago (Chaston, 1997). Due to this practitioner-led transition towards EM, there has been an increasing amount of growth in EM courses in university marketing and entrepreneurship programs as part of their curriculum (Gilmore et al., 2020).

However, EM as a body of research appears fragmented (Gilmore et al., 2020). It lacks a strong theoretical underpinning which is mirrored in tertiary settings, so EM course design and instruction is largely dependent upon individual lecturer experiences, idiosyncrasies, geographic locality and the stage of course development. There is a need for programs and courses to develop a taxonomy of factors relevant to EM, and course design and instruction should include competencies relevant to entrepreneurship (Morris et al., 2013).

EM teaching approaches may encompass a variety of methods including face-to-face or flexible delivery lectures, industry practitioner presentations, handouts, video, case study exercises, group discussions and role-plays (Henry, Hill & Leitch, 2005). Early research by Gibb (1987b) contrasted real world learning with classroom learning and suggested that much university learning is outdated and do not equip students with the necessary skill sets required for practical success in industry. Entrepreneurship programs and courses have made an impact with students by adopting this pedagogical philosophy, as evidenced by EM courses including ideas such as effectual reasoning and "Lean Startup" concepts (Read et al., 2009; Blank, 2013). Generally, combinations of traditional and non-traditional approaches are used, and incorporating experiential learning has been popular with students as it gives them the opportunity to be more engaged (Bjerke & Karlsson, 2013).

This research attempts to expand our current understanding of EM education by exploring the effectiveness of a new course offering. The findings will be used to further define the development of the course and eventually create a model specifying best practice in EM course design and instruction. Specifically, we investigate student's attitudes towards the course, what perceptions they have about the experience, and what can be learnt to increase student learning and curriculum development for the future. Accordingly, to gain a broad understanding of the attitudes towards the course, four research questions were developed.

RQ1: What did you think of the course? What did you like or dislike most?
RQ2: What would you like to see changed to make the course better in the future?
RQ3: Has this course better prepared you for a career? Why not or in what ways?
RQ4: What types of learning methods were most helpful? How could the course be improved?

Next, the data collection method using a focus group methodology is described, and results and implications for administrators and educators are presented. Finally, future directions are presented.

METHODOLOGY

Focus group methodology has been found to be an effective means of gathering data, as interaction allows participants to be more candid because of the psychological security derived from group membership, and the realization that what they say is not necessarily identified with them (Hess, 1968). Often subjects may need to listen to other participants before they solidify their own viewpoints (Crabtree et al., 1993), and group dynamics add to quality control with data collection, that is provided by the group pressure exerted on false or extreme views (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The researchers used a combination of probing open-ended questions and observed nonverbal responses to triangulate the data (Byers & Wilcox, 1991).

The moderator for this research was the course assistant lecturer who taught classes each week to two separate class groups and thus had already established rapport with participants and possessed knowledge on the course content and methods. Focus group moderators are nominal leaders who establish rapport, are comfortable with group dynamics, keep the group on track, maintain enthusiasm, and promote free discussion (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Moreover, we adopted a tightly structured moderating style, and ensured that the research venue was familiar to encourage meaningful interaction

(Karger, 1989), meaning sessions were conducted in the students' normal classrooms and lecture times.

The new EM course was open to a maximum of forty students which filled in the first two days of availability, with students being split into two separate groups of 15-20 people for the focus groups. The focus group data collection occurred at two different times during the 16-week semester (one mid-semester and the other towards the end of the semester). This method allowed for richer themes to be explored and longitudinal data to be gathered (Yin, 1988). The depth of this collective, interactive approach gives stronger insight into participant attitudes and perceptions (Levitt et al., 2018).

For data analysis, we promoted interpretative accuracy through the integration of non-verbal observations with verbal responses (Kruegar, 1993). To capture the range of impressions on the topic, the responses were content-analyzed and supported preliminary conclusions through the comparisons with direct (typical) quotations provided by the groups (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Morgan, 1988). Finally, the constant comparative method was used to describe the process of separating themes as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967). This means the raw data is read and important points, or themes, are identified, constantly comparing previous themes to ensure any new themes add more understanding (Gawlik, 2018)[VL3][DP4].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following are the four research questions and examples of the most common and/or typical responses. Analysis and discussion are presented after each question and in the following section themes are explored. The first question (R1) was: What did you think of the course? What did you like or dislike most? The following quotations represent the most typical responses:

- "The course was good - I liked that the material was different from other marketing courses"
- "I liked the entrepreneurial aspect; I'd like to start my own business one day"
- "The course was great, it made you think outside the box"
- "I like the different approaches - finally something different"
- "Some of the material is similar to other marketing courses"

Responses to R1 were generally very positive. Students agreed that the course content was interesting and the statement/comment "different" was used several times in a positive sense. Care was taken to introduce students to a wide variety of possibilities during classes, such as guerrilla, viral and ambient marketing which were new concepts to most in the course, albeit they had seen some examples of these approaches in the media. Additionally, it appeared most students had some interest in starting their own business ventures, and with a lack of an entrepreneurship program at the time, this course offered material towards that end and the tools and methods presented were of particular interest (Peltier & Scovotti, 2010).

A contrasting view was presented by some students that some of the material was similar to other marketing sources, which was surprising as most students were revealing a positive difference in the content. A closer investigation of the course material revealed that indeed several basic marketing concepts were still covered, but the EM concepts introduced were generally an extension of existing theory. For example, the Product Life

Cycle theory postulates that products proceed from birth, to growth, maturity and finally decline (Day, 1981), and that those in the maturity phase might benefit from innovative EM techniques due to market saturation (Alqahtani & Uslay, 2020). These types of discussions and perceived repetition may have been the source of these comments. **[VL5][VL6]**[DP7]

The second question or R2 was: What would you like to see changed to make the course better? Typical responses included:

- "Criteria for assessment should be clearer – like, how do you grade us on 'creativity'?"
- "I think there should be different ways of teaching as well"
- "More class involvement, or activities and less lectures"
- "I am not sure that these EM techniques are necessarily better, they are different, but show more on why we should use them"
- "Show us from the beginning where EM fits into the big picture"

Rather interesting comments surfaced with this question as students were more than happy to share how the course could be improved. Many responses were closely focused on pedagogical processes, such as including innovation in the delivery of the material and not simply teaching the same way (lecture) as other classes. Additionally, comments on assessing creativity are valid as this is challenging for instructors, as judging creativity is known to be subjective (Park et al., 2016). This feedback has merit, because as educators we often talk about the need for innovation, risk with trying new alternative methods but then not integrating this philosophy into the classroom can appear, on the surface at least, to be hypocritical. Students of course are not subject to university and/or departmental policies, quality assessment of teaching and fairness in grading issues, among others, all of which must be addressed. However, the point is acknowledged, and the area of delivery and assessment should be analyzed in the next version of the course.

Other students suggested that much of the material was, while interesting, not following an obvious sequential path of learning. As an example, while the marketing mix is a standard and common inclusion in most marketing textbooks, and its theoretical underpinnings are influential throughout marketing philosophy, the EM course lacked such a structured approach. This could be in large part to the newness of the area in general and a lack of research. Amjad et al., (2020b) propose that EM theory still lacks detail and Rideout and Gray (2013) suggested at the time that EM is a phenomenon where practices have raced far ahead of theory, leaving a hole in the research that is needed to explain it. Thus, the race to teach an area that is still in its theoretical infancy leads to this dilemma.

The third question or R3 was: Has this course better prepared you for a career? In what ways? Common responses included:

- "Yeah, I wasn't even aware that these techniques existed. I feel I could apply these in large companies as well"
- "I think this course should be a requirement, you could use these (strategies) everyday"
- "I don't think many other marketing students know about all this"
- "Sort of - the course showed us what the techniques are, but I think there should be more on when to use them"

- Yes and no. We learned about them, but I think it would have helped for us to apply the things we learned instead of a multiple-choice test at the end"

This question was generally answered positively, students were satisfied with learning about the varied approaches of EM, and that the course content provided several new ideas and methods that could enhance their careers and job opportunities. Most thought the breadth of information was not only new to them but cutting edge in the industry, and that potential employers, particularly those not familiar with EM, would find this appealing. Those that wanted to start their own businesses also appreciated the low-cost approach to many of the methods, as EM has its early roots in resource-constrained environments (Morris et al., 2002).

Those students that gave a tempered response to this question suggested that additional information could be provided that allowed for more specific planning around EM, or how and when to implement EM. Utilizing the earlier example of the Product Life Cycle, where different stages of a product are described through its introduction, growth maturity and decline, there are varying marketing strategies suggested based on where in the cycle a product falls. This is the type of theoretical implementation plan that is not currently available, or at least not well tested, for EM. Once again, this issue may lie with a new sub-discipline that is as yet not fully defined (Rezvani, Mobaraki & Farsi, 2017).

Our fourth research question was: What types of learning methods have been the most helpful? What could be better? Typical responses included:

- "I'd like the chance to have more practical application of the techniques. Like, could we do this for as a class project for a real firm?"
- "We didn't like the written project – it was like all the other classes"
- "Too much group work"
- "The case studies were good, real life examples like those are best"
- "Guest speakers are okay – if they're not boring and are good at what they do"
- "How can we simulate the real-world more?"

This question was useful in gathering data with specific to pedagogy. Firstly, there was a strong inclination towards a practical implementation of the material in real-world settings. This is not an uncommon request from students, as universities have felt more pressure from the business community to better prepare students with transferable skills in the workplace (Cummins & Johnson, 2021). However, this process can be difficult to manage (if not practically impossible) in larger universities with a large number of students. Further, the impact of any additional workload on faculty that are busy managing multiple courses, service and research may leave this goal better suited to smaller-sized institutions, that could manage the smaller number of students, align with local firms and provide satisfactory assessment outcomes.

Other responses involved comments that are not uncommon for many lecturers, such as an over-reliance on group work. While this can be simply resolved, the implications for teachers to switch to individual assignments can be challenging and the 'liability of volume' for larger institutions makes this idea challenging. There were several positive responses to case studies. The use of case studies in teaching has been widely studied and they allow us to delve into principles, theories and issues as they occur in the real world, or to mix theory with context (Colbert et al., 1996; Lapoule & Lynch, 2018). Case studies offer a bridge to real-life business problems, and for larger institutions that cannot offer experiential activities with real firms, they may offer the best solution.

Additional Findings & Themes from Research

As mentioned previously, focus groups were conducted at two different times during the semester, and this was interesting as it revealed two different themes or insights into the perceptions of students. The more favorable responses given at the half-way point of the first semester appeared to diminish significantly in the second round of focus group questioning. Reasons for this could be many, including the obvious stronger assessment demands placed on students towards the end of a semester (our course required a final group paper and a comprehensive exam which is not unusual). However, when added to several other classes the increased pressure that emerges at the end of most semesters, this may have contributed to their negative perceptions.

However, when probed further, students exhibited an obvious shift in attitude toward the class, and the strong start to the course shown in the mid-semester was overcome by the "boring" and far too familiar "academic" assessment by semesters end. These responses went beyond the normal "too much work" scenarios often heard by instructors every semester, rather, some students sounded genuinely disappointed in the normative finish to the course. For example, comments from the second focus group suggested the course had simply been labeled differently as it contained a substantial amount of traditional marketing instruction. Thus, the back end of the course that included a substantial amount of traditional assessment is where the most improvement could be made. However, these changes or improvements appeared to be relevant in the content, delivery and assessment areas. That said, it should be emphasized that students overall tended to consider the course to be worthwhile, interesting and enjoyable.

FUTURE DIRECTION & CONCLUSION

The results show that firstly, students generally held favorable feelings towards the course. While this attitude diminished for some from mid-semester, most regarded the concepts, techniques and overall benefits they received as very valuable. Secondly, students exhibited some confusion as to how or where EM "fits" into the big picture, when and where to use the methods for example. This suggests that instructors should spend time early in the course explaining the benefits of EM and how and why it is important for marketers and entrepreneurs alike. However, while instructors should reiterate the importance of the concept, it should be made clear that EM is by no means a panacea for marketing and will not solve all marketing problems and challenges and should be considered within this context.

Additionally, students showed dissatisfaction with concepts such as "innovation" and "creativity" used within the course content, but not being perceived as similarly important in assessment items including group and individual projects. This could be symptomatic of the fourth research issue explored where students exhibited some unhappiness that the course material and assessment being like other marketing courses and not showing a clear separation. This appears to present somewhat of a paradox for educators – how are we to reward "out of the box" thinking but still assess students fairly with some level of predictability and practicality?

Lastly, students strongly preferred practical applications of course material and if possible, should be a component of EM course offerings. Examples could include mentor programs, developing alternative marketing plans for real companies, pitching to real investors and case studies. More research into this area is necessary and as discussed, the context of each university course would have to be considered.

For educators, while we espouse the virtues of new approaches to knowledge creation through the synthesis of discipline activities (such as developing alternative marketing plans for real clients), we often do not make the shift towards assessing students on this content adequately. Rather, we may tend to rest the bulk of assessment in the context of traditional marketing evaluations, whether through habit, risk of failure or added workload. Perhaps marketing and entrepreneurship educators must be open to a degree of risk, be prepared to expose themselves to students (and colleagues) as not always having the "right" answer and being a co-learner in the process. However, this can be problematic in the "real world" of academia, where student performance must be judged on clear criteria. This leap may become easier when the dearth of research in EM becomes more unified and theoretically sound.

The implications for teaching from this research are that EM is a positive addition to marketing and entrepreneurial programs. EM is still an evolving concept (Jones et al., 2018), but educators need to be clear on learning objectives and assessment and be "entrepreneurial" themselves in delivery methods. Additionally, the course should be positioned in the curriculum so that it has clear and distinct objectives over other course offerings. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for students, a key aspect is to attempt to integrate a practical emphasis in learning, whether through experiential activities integrated with local firms, or through the use of case studies.

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