

The Marketing Trade Show: A bridge between theory and practice for first year students

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Abstract. The Marketing Trade Show (MTS) is the showcase event in an introductory marketing course of a four year management degree, where student groups exhibit a new product and its marketing plan. This experience-based MTS learning activity begins with the students devising an innovative product within a predetermined consumer goods category. Working in groups, the students then develop this product and decide how they will market it. Weekly assignments are purposefully designed to be practical exercises in applying key theoretical principles and concepts. Throughout this process, each student keeps a reflective journal. Their work culminates in the MTS event, when students' exhibits are evaluated by teachers and guest judges. The MTS learning activity accounts for 85% of the course's internal assessment.

The experiential learning scholarship provides a solid theoretical base for our ongoing and purposeful development of the MTS as a teaching/learning activity. However, while students have given informal feedback on the MTS activity, there has been no systematic research on the students' experiences. This paper reports such research. Students were recruited to take part in focus groups; one held two weeks prior to the MTS event and the second in the week following the event. We ran a total of eight focus groups, four held before MTS event and four held after the MTS event. Student participants reported the real-life 'action' phases of the MTS provided them with the experience of translating marketing principles into a product marketing mix. While many of these students perceived the reflective journal activity to be too unstructured, such uncertainty may actually increase the effectiveness of their learning. Participants discussed their MTS exhibits and evaluation by judges as providing an exciting balance to the conceptual course material.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Marketing Trade Show (MTS), an experience-based teaching/learning activity used in a large, introductory marketing course, requires students to apply key marketing principles and concepts to a real-life marketing challenge. Over the course of the course, students work in groups to develop a new consumer product, make key targeting decisions, and design a marketing plan for their product. Finally, their decision-making and effort come together in the MTS event, where students exhibit their work to classmates and the wider university community.

The MTS activity is the central teaching/learning activity for this course and has been adapted from similar teaching/learning activities successfully implemented overseas at various levels of undergraduate study [2],[28]. It provides a strong and meaningful focus for teaching in that it offers an instant and complex real-life scenario to which lecturers and tutors can apply the fundamental theoretical principles and concepts discussed in class. It also provides a meaningful focus for the students' learning – their tutorials and assignments are structured to support the development of their product and its marketing plan for

the MTS event. Mindful also of the responsibility of tertiary educators to foster transferable skills in our students, the MTS activity is designed to prepare students for the use of case studies, role plays, group projects, reflective journals and teamwork in later marketing courses and to enhance the interpersonal and problem-solving skills valued in the workforce. The MTS activity accounts for 85% of the course's internal assessment.

The experiential learning scholarship provides a solid theoretical base for our ongoing and purposeful development of the MTS as a teaching/learning activity. However, while we have had some feedback from course evaluations and comments passed on from tutors, there has been no formal research into the students' experience of the MTS. This paper reports research conducted with the A Semester (March–June) 2009 student cohort, which was designed to rectify this situation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Experience-based learning, also known as experiential learning, continues to be extremely influential in management education after more than 40 years. Commonly expressed simply as learning by 'doing',

experiential learning provides a sound – and popular - rationale for a range of teaching/learning methods used in management education classrooms, such as problem-based learning, simulations, case studies, games, and role plays. The benefits of experiential learning are enthusiastically highlighted by business educators. They include the opportunity for students to actively experiment in realistic business situations that develop a deeper understanding of course concepts, generate “richer and more robust” insights into business practice and environments (p. 110, [24]), as well as improve the transferable skills prized by business practitioners such as decision-making, problem-solving, planning, written and oral communication, creativity [2], teamwork and teambuilding, and interpersonal skills [7].

In marketing education, experiential learning activities are widely used to allow students to practise applying marketing theory in real-world scenarios before they graduate, and to develop important knowledge and skills that are not easily acquired from a marketing textbook [3],[8]. Experiential learning activities favored by marketing educators frequently involve group work where small teams of students set about solving marketing problems by applying relevant theory. Petkus [22] encourages the use of experiential learning techniques in the introductory marketing course in particular, as a way for first year marketing students to experience real-world application of the basic principles of marketing presented in lectures. This recommendation is supported by educators of first year students in other disciplines (e.g., [20]) as a means of making the foundations of the discipline relevant and meaningful while maintaining the enthusiasm of students for the subject. Experiential learning activities that involve group-work add the extra dimension of collaboration to the students’ learning experiences. In introductory courses, group-work is seen to be valuable for reducing students’ feelings of isolation when typically class sizes are large, student participation is minimal, and personalization is constrained [17]. A general benefit group-work offers is its simulation of the team approach adopted by many businesses. For the individual student, collaborative learning can develop specific interpersonal skills that are valued by employers [2],[7],[11].

At the centre of the various experiential learning approaches and teaching techniques is the fundamental conviction that we learn when we are actively engaged in an experience. Experiential learning is characteristically (p. 350, [1]):

- Active, rather than passive, learning;
- Student-based, rather than teacher-based, learning;
- Subjective experiences and personal growth;
- Learning through evaluation and reflection;
- Perception-based, rather than theory-based, learning;
- Participative rather than rote learning;
- Inductive, rather than deductive, learning;
- Exploration, invention and application.

While there is a range of models and theories of experiential learning, the most popular is Kolb’s experiential learning theory, in which he defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge...results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41, [13]). Kolb expands on this definition in his comprehensive, four stage model of the learning process. This model organizes the transformation of experience into knowledge around the key stages of concrete experience (i.e., engagement in an activity); reflective observation (i.e., watching, discussing, elaborating on that experience); abstract conceptualization (i.e., in-depth thinking); and active experimentation (i.e., the doing phase in which the learner ‘tests’ learning in a new situation) [22]. Corresponding to the stage of Kolb’s model at which an individual prefers to enter, are four different learning styles: diverger, assimilator, converger, accommodator. The learning styles framework theoretically ensures that an experiential learning activity based on Kolb’s model will cater for a range of divergent student learning styles.

The four stages of Kolb’s experiential learning model comprise a learning cycle which the learner can enter at any stage; however, learning is most effective when the individual moves through all four stages “experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned” (p. 194, [14]). Rather than the traditional focus on transmitting information, experiential educators purposefully set about creating ‘space’ for students to actively express and test what they have learned. It is important to note that several commentators stress the criticality of reflection in Kolb’s learning model (e.g., [9],[19]) as the crucial link between the concrete and the abstract. Without the reflection “an experience that is not reflected upon is unrealized learning” (p. 7, [15]). To best foster student learning, some educationalists have long advocated that reflection activities need to be designed and implemented in a loose, unstructured way (e.g., Bruner 1961, as cited in [12]). However, other scholars contest such advice vigorously and recommend instead that reflection activities should occur regularly and should be guided [9],[22]. Their calls for strong guidance in experiential learning activities are supported by a body of empirical research on human cognitive development which indicates that novice students ‘empowered’ to learn (according to the experiential learning philosophy) simply might not have the requisite ‘cognitive architecture’ to accommodate or assimilate new knowledge successfully by themselves [12]. For this reason, as well as presenting the essential discipline-specific content so that it is compatible with the cognitive architecture of novice students, educators also need to proactively guide the learning processes of their students. Direct instruction and instructions on teaching/learning activities supports the cognitive processing necessary for student learning (op. cit.). Thus, teachers are charged with educating in both content and learning processes. This research into

cognitive architecture and learning clearly aligns with contemporary theorizing on the importance of scaffolding for effective and efficient learning [4].

To summarise, although experiential learning has become a central tenet in contemporary business education, it is not without its theoretical issues (see [10]) and practical challenges. From a purely practical perspective, experiential learning can present tertiary teachers with some interesting challenges. Concerns include the extensive amount of planning and thought required to implement an experiential learning activity successfully [30], perceptions by students that the experiential learning activity makes excessive demands on their time [26] and involves an excessive workload [22], the difficulties that some teachers have in shifting their role from 'boss' to 'coach' and their evaluations from outcome-focused to process-focused [7], and the student confusion and loss of confidence caused when the experiential learning activity is too complex [24].

In the next section, we provide background details of the Marketing Trade Show, an experiential learning activity for first year marketing students, before presenting the results of the research into students' experiences of this activity.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE MARKETING TRADE SHOW

Each semester, more than 200 students take the first year marketing course. Over the 12 week semester, they attend seven tutorials (one per week) that are devoted to the MTS activity. Tutorials are comprised of 12-16 students. Students work in groups with an average of four members. Group formation is based on either self-selection or tutor-selected. Tutors are given the responsibility for deciding if the students in a given tutorial should form their own group or if the tutor should select group members since tutorial composition (gender, age, ethnicity, skills) can vary within and between tutorials. For example, friends may enroll in the same tutorial and want to work together. In other situations, international students may or may not want to work together. The MTS is likely to be one of the first group experiences for first year university students so our aim is to form groups where students feel comfortable with their group members and within which they are willing to share their ideas and talents.

During their tutorials, students work on the project in their groups. Five of the six tutorial assignments and tutorial discussions are directly related to the MTS. The tutorial assignments are carefully designed practical exercises that involve students applying the concepts and theories learned in lectures to the development of their product idea and marketing mix. As teachers we endeavour to provide a scaffolding framework wherein the learners can build their own understanding from their current knowledge [4]. This active involvement in the learning process has been linked to more positive learning outcomes [25]. These assignments guide the

students toward the final task, the MTS exhibit, which is a major summative assessment activity for the course.

The MTS activity begins for the students when each student thinks of an innovative product idea within a predetermined consumer goods category (e.g., confectionery, toys, travel, sports and leisure). These individual ideas are shared with their group. Next, the group decides on the idea to be developed. The group can decide not to select any of the individuals' ideas but to look for another idea. Alternatively, a group might work with a product idea for a while and then abandon it because their research shows either that the product already exists or that consumers lack interest in the proposed product. At certain stages, a group is able to start again without being penalised as this is an important part of the experiential learning process.

Once they have chosen their final idea, the students complete a range of assignments based on marketing decisions relating to segmentation, target market, product design, where the product will be sold, how it will be promoted, and at what price. Each step of the process mirrors decisions that marketers must make. These real-life concrete or 'action' phases of the MTS provide vivid, direct experiences of translating theoretical marketing principles and concepts into a product marketing mix and are designed to actively involve the students in the learning experience [21],[25].

Two-thirds of the tutorial assignments leading up to the MTS event are individually completed and assessed. Each student completes the tutorial assignment questions on their own and brings their responses to the next tutorial where they are shared among the group members. The remaining tutorial assignments are completed by the group. The tutor mentors each group, providing feedback that guides the group in progressing their product idea, developing the marketing mix, and designing their MTS exhibit.

Students are required to write an online MTS Reflection Journal of five entries, four written before the MTS event and the fifth entered after the event. The reflection questions are designed to guide students in thinking more deeply about their experiences and to connect the 'feeling' aspects related to the project with the thinking and doing aspects (Kolb's model). This reflective phase, where a student personally assesses his/her experience, is a critical component of the experiential learning model that has been shown to increase the effectiveness of learning [6].

Finally, students showcase their product idea and marketing mix at the end of the semester at the MTS event, to which faculty, other management students, local business people, and the general public are invited. The event is similar to a commercial trade show and/or a science fair. More than 50 exhibits are presented during the evening in the main foyer and classrooms of the management school. Each group is given a table to use for their exhibit but must provide all

other supplies and resources, including the display board. Groups are encouraged to be creative following the contention that today's learners are visual and kinesthetic learners [18].

Each exhibit is evaluated by four independent judges on set criteria relating to the marketing mix (product concept, pricing, distribution and promotion), communication of the product's benefits, and the exhibit itself. The judges assess the exhibits according to these criteria and also write constructive feedback for each group. The role of the judges is to act as potential retail buyers; therefore, they do not ask the students questions but evaluate each exhibit as a form of promotion. The Best Overall Winner for the MTS event is determined by the independent judges. Students are encouraged to visit other group's exhibits and vote for Best Display, Best Dressed and Most Innovative Product winners. These three contests are peer-selected with the emphasis on fun. Prizes for the winning groups, which typically include vouchers from business sponsors and university merchandise, are awarded by the dean of the management school at a presentation ceremony to close the evening.

The MTS is a carefully managed experience-based learning activity used in a large first year marketing class. It is continually re-designed and refined, mainly on the basis of our reflections, discussions, intuitions, and experiences as teachers, to emphasise the action and reflection phases of experiential learning [13],[21] within the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction embodied in Kolb's experiential learning theory. In the following sections, we present results of a research investigation into student experiences of the MTS activity, their perceptions of the various components of the activity, their opinions of the MTS event, issues that they encountered that impacted their learning, and the overall effectiveness of the MTS as an experience-based learning activity.

4. METHOD

The research design used four matched groups of students in two sets of focus groups (eight focus groups in total). The first set of focus groups was held two weeks prior to the MTS event. The second set, consisting of the same participants from the first set, was held in the week following the MTS event (week 10 of a 12-week semester). All participants were current students of the first year introductory marketing course. The participants were recruited through an announcement at a weekly lecture and were offered five additional marks towards the grade for their MTS exhibit as an incentive for participation.

The four focus groups comprised 28 participants in total, equally split between male and female students. Two of the focus groups consisted of domestic New Zealand students, while the remaining two comprised international students from China, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, the Solomon Islands, and Hong Kong. All of

the participants were in their first semester at the university. Prior to each focus group, participants were informed that their responses would be audio-taped, yet their identities would remain anonymous.

The guide for the pre-MTS focus groups consisted of nine structured questions relating to participants' attitudes about how the assignments helped in their learning the basic marketing principles and concepts, their perception of the MTS activity compared with other types of assessments, and the group learning aspects of the MTS assignments. At the time of their first focus group, participants had completed weekly assignments in which they had formulated product ideas, identified a pricing strategy, and were in the process of making promotional decisions.

The nine structured questions in the post-MTS focus group guide related to students' attitudes and experiences of the MTS event itself and its influence on their learning. These questions included asking participants about the competitive aspect of the MTS, the effective display of their marketing knowledge through a single exhibit board, and the impact of group learning on their experiences.

The focus groups lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, were audio-taped and transcribed. The analysis of the transcripts involved a close reading of the data, categorizing the data into relevant themes based upon the research objectives of the investigation, and determining the similarities and differences between responses [5],[16],[27]. Both inductive and a priori methods of analysis were applied [23],[29]. Throughout the coding process, quotes were extracted to elaborate themes and sub-themes. The latter stage of the analysis looked for implications of the themes and their interrelationships.

Four major themes emerged from the students experiences prior to the MTS event. These are summarised in Figure 1 and labelled under the headings (a) Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation; (b) Learning Styles; (c) Satisfaction; and (d) Reflection. After the MTS event, there were three major themes to the participants' experience, which are summarised in Figure 2 using the headings (a) Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation, (b) Competition, and (c) Group Learning. Both the Pre- and Post-MTS sets of themes were categorized as content or process related.

It is important to note that Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation constituted a main theme in the participants' experiences both before and after the MTS event. Also, group learning issues were common across the data from the Pre- and Post-MTS event focus groups. However, while group learning was constructed as a sub-theme (within the Learning Styles theme) by participants in their first focus group, it emerged as a major theme after the MTS event. All themes will be discussed in more detail in the sections below.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Pre MTS Findings

The four major themes in participants' experience-based learning leading up to the MTS event are illustrated in Figure 1. Although all themes were important, the group learning sub-theme (of the Learning Styles theme) stood out as being particularly salient to these students' experiences. Accordingly, the group learning sub-theme was further developed and is illustrated in Figure 2. Each of the Pre-MTS themes is discussed briefly with supporting quotes.

Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation - Prior to beginning the course and the MTS, all participants believed that marketing was synonymous with sales and advertising. However, they agreed that working through the MTS activity was making them aware of the complicated process involved in turning an idea into a product and taking it to market. Participants talked about better understanding how the marketing mix elements fit together and being able to apply the theories to a practical challenge to reinforce the idea that the process is "doable". Through their decision-making and practice, the participants were becoming aware that "success in marketing is not only about having the most creative or innovative idea", but if other key marketing factors were not adapted in a way that is appealing to the target market, even the most creative idea can be ineffective.

Learning Styles - Participants saw the MTS process as offering them an alternative to traditional assessments: "people learn stuff in different ways, some people just learn through reading but most people learn by doing". The weekly assignments allowed participants to "apply the knowledge that [they've already] learned", to "reinforce these ideas" and to "revise the concepts allowing [them] to understand them better". The assignments made marketing more realistic for these students, enabling higher retention of marketing principles. As one participant stated "because you're using your own idea and making a product, you're forced to make sense of it and you remember it better". Participants liked what they called the "laddering process", or "how the assignments break down the elements of the Trade Show". According to participants, this laddering helped to ensure that students were prepared, limited the stress levels, gave students a goal to work towards, and allowed them to "know what's coming each week so that you're not just all of a sudden bombarded with assignments".

Satisfaction - The participants perceived the MTS tutorial assignments as a refreshing change from "all the regular book work", making them more motivated to actually do the work, and giving them a higher sense of accomplishment when they had completed it. These students liked the sense of real purpose the tutorial assignments gave them: "you're not just doing something to hand into a teacher to get a mark, the

assignments actually lead up to something, the Trade Show".

For some participants the tutorial assignments were fun and creative exercises that allowed a high degree of freedom: "Other assignments are boring and are based on what the lecturers want you to do. In these assignments you can use your own ideas and opinions; you're not confined to a set structure". However, other participants felt the lack of structure was a disadvantage: "There's like too much theory - you have to memorize everything, there're no calculations and no definite thing behind it all."

The relevance of the predetermined consumer goods category for this semester was a prominent source of frustration and dissatisfaction. One participant explained that after seeing the topics for previous semesters he had been really excited at the prospect of the MTS project, only to be disappointed when their topic was announced – a topic that he did not relate to at all: "the topic was the biggest negative to me". Others found the topic was "too limited" and believed that a different and/or broader topic would have enabled them to be "more creative and innovative", and "more passionate about the product" and the assignments. Developing a product and its marketing plan to fit a predetermined product category (rather than to meet a consumer want or need) led to frequent confusion: "You'd think that normally you would cater to demand".

Reflection – Participants found the concept of reflection confusing and the entries in the reflection journal repetitive. Many of these students were unsure of the purpose of the journal ("there is no clear goal") and consequently they were not motivated to put much effort into it. They were unsure of the assessment criteria, unsure of what to write, and often felt they would like to include issues that did not directly relate to the questions: "I have other things relating to the course in general that I want to talk about, but don't know if I'm allowed". Participants felt they were repeating themselves and often did not have enough to write. The outstanding impression was that the participants felt they did not have enough to say given the number of entries in the Reflection Journal.

5.1.1 Group Learning Sub-themes

The group learning sub-themes can be grouped into collective synergies, individualism and group dynamics categories (refer Figure 2). The following responses were prominent in the participants' experiences.

Participants recognised that working within groups allowed for "a mixture of different ideas on a difficult topic", and that each member strengths that could be beneficial to the group. However, these collective synergies were offset by the individualism that participants reported influenced the groups: "Group work does have a way of bringing you down". This individualism was also complicated by some of the

assignments being completed individually, an assessment strategy which these students believed hindered their ability to work as a team. For some, it seemed that the processes necessary to amalgamate the individual pieces of work proved problematic: “We’ve all been doing it individually, [we] don’t have one unified idea of what’s happening”. Group work also affected the level of individual member’s commitment to the final product idea, as described in this comment: “To merge our ideas when we have each done the assignments separately, we have to negotiate with our group and end up agreeing upon a product that we’re not passionate about because it’s not the one we initially chose”.

Moreover, while the work was set up to be done in a group, these students reported that it was not a collective effort in reality: “It’s easier to just divide up the work because it’s too hard to find times to meet”. Some participants said that although they had thought that dividing the work between individuals would effectively “stamp out free riders”, in the end “one person is (often) stuck having to fix everything up”. Differences in ability became clearer over the course of the group work and participants expressed frustration with those members who they perceived were less competent than themselves: “I get stuck doing pretty much everything”.

Group dynamics were a recurring issue in the data. Time management, organisation, decision making,

dominance, conflict resolution, were common concerns: “Most of my time and energy goes into organizing the group”. Some group members became dominant and bossy, dismissing ideas that other students proposed. Said one participant: “It sucks that all of our marks are based on it [the group work] but our ideas aren’t being considered.”

Participants also described a range of skills that they believed had been developed during the MTS group work. The most common group work related skills identified by these students were:

- learning to compromise within groups;
- improving time management;
- learning to respect others’ abilities;
- resolving group conflict;
- learning what works in groups and what doesn’t;
- appreciating personal strengths;
- developing cultural sensitivities;
- appreciating capabilities of other international students

It was obvious, however, that for these participants their perceptions of the group work were dominated by the negative issues and experiences. For some, these group work problems affected their overall perceptions of the MTS activity as a whole: “Because of my group situation, I have mixed feelings towards the Trade Show”.

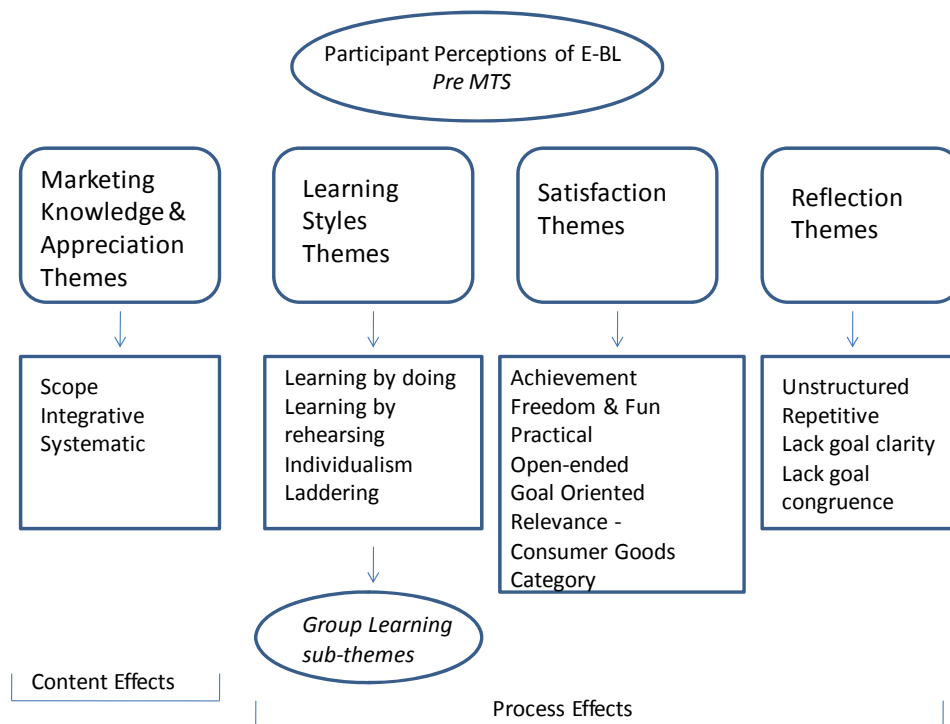


Figure 1: Participant Perceptions of E-BL Pre MTS and Related Themes and Sub-Themes

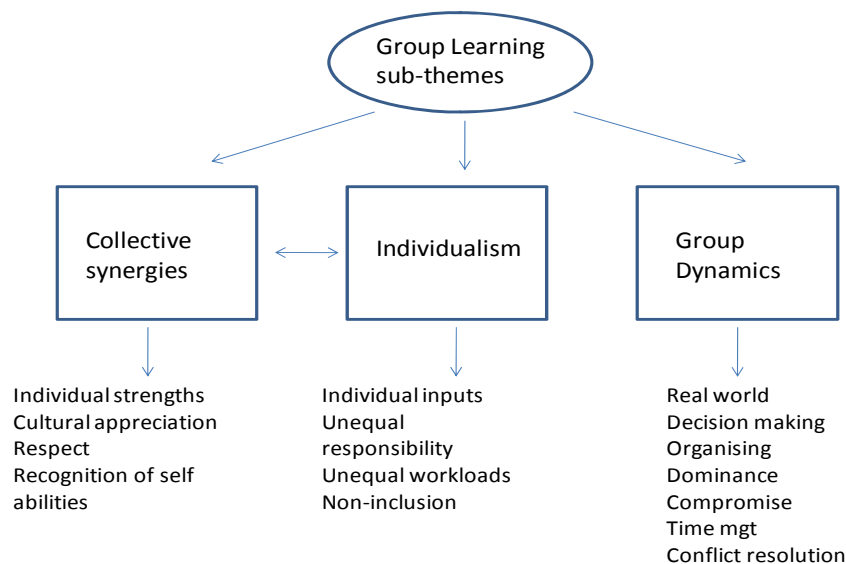


Figure 2: Group Learning Sub-Themes and Related Categories

5.2 Post MTS Findings

After the MTS event, three major themes were evident in the participants' experiences. These are summarized in Figure 3 as Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation, Competition, and Group Learning.

Marketing Knowledge and Appreciation – Some participants considered that being required to display their product mix on a single board was both realistic and equitable: “It was fairer”, and “[you] know what is required of you”. It was realistic because “in the real world, products have to try and sell with limited information”. Other participants felt the single board was restrictive and would have liked to be questioned by the judges so that they could better demonstrate the extent of their knowledge: “When you're asked questions it's easier to explain it because I don't think a board is that adequate”.

A prominent sub-theme was the lack of ownership of the product idea, experienced when participants could not become passionate about it. Some participants believed that the product idea should be formulated as a group; “I got real passionate about the product [idea] I designed and then I had to throw it away, and I never got that passion back for the product we're doing now. If we had started the product together (as a group) from the very beginning we would've all been passionate about it.”

Competition – Many participants reported being overwhelmed by the intensity of the competition and then adopting a satisficing or completion approach. “At the start when you're coming up with your product you think, man I could win this, but then the process is just so long and everyone's so secretive about what they're doing that you sort of give up on that idea after a while”. Many groups became more focused on finalizing their products and ensuring their exhibits

were completed on time than on competing for prizes; and only on the night of the MTS event did they focus on the potential to win prizes. Many participants viewed the competition element positively stating that “if there wasn't that [competition] people wouldn't try ... that's what made it more fun. It forced us to try and stand out more”. Participants commented that the competition offered the groups the potential for recognition and differentiation.

However, there was also the perception that both the actual MTS event and the awarding of prizes trivialised marketing – “[it was] more like a popularity contest, people just vote for their friends”. The relevancy and number of the rewards and prizes were important to the participants. These students perceived that there was a lack of prizes based upon marketing knowledge; “you don't really think about getting a prize because only four groups win”.

Group Learning – The post-MTS data showed that group issues of the type described by participants in their first focus group had been either exacerbated or resolved by the time of the second session. Some participants found that as the event approached, their ideas were dismissed by their group members to an even greater extent due to the additional pressures and time constraints that affected the groups. Increased frustrations were noted: “My group edited all my work, they didn't even humour me and say ‘Yeah that's a good idea’, they're just like ‘No!’ – there was no discussion at all”. In situations such as this, students began to lose confidence in their own abilities and eventually just “gave up”; “In the end, I didn't actually feel any connection with my product”.

Several participants believed that the MTS activity did not mirror the real world for them as individuals, simply because “we don't have aligning goals - marketing is a compulsory course so some [of us] are just doing it because they have to.” Others remarked that “a lot of

group time is spent just working out the pecking order, but in the real world this is already given to you. You have job descriptions”. These issues of lack of personal relevance became more detrimental to the group the closer the MTS event approached, particularly in the

week before the MTS event when it was imperative to work effectively together

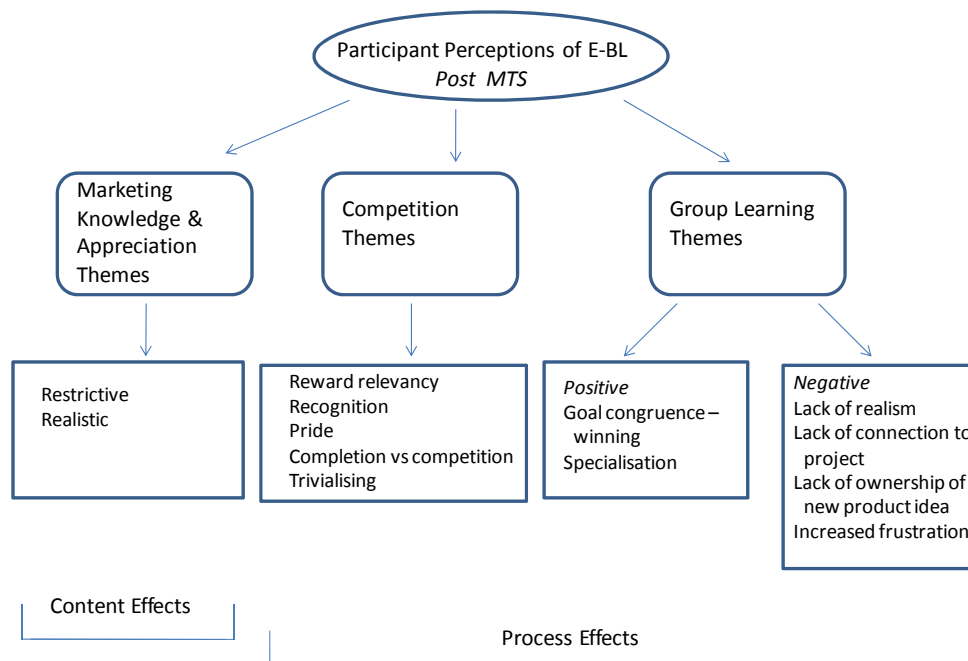


Figure 3: Participant Perceptions of E-BL Post MTS and Related Themes and Sub-Themes

At the same time, participants also had begun to really understand and respect both the abilities and the flaws of the other members in their group. For example, domestic students reported that while many international students lacked confidence in their written abilities, they proved to be skilled in advertising and packaging design, and often could contribute superior computer skills. International participants felt they were better able to effectively contribute to their groups when it came to these more concrete phases of the MTS activity.

Finally, the earlier conflict within some groups also diminished as group members were united by the shared goal of winning a MTS prize or attaining a high mark: “We all just wanted get things done the best we could in the end”

6. IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to examine how first year marketing students experience the learning process of acting, reflecting, doing and thinking in the MTS activity. The implications of the research findings provide clues as to how we can develop this activity so that it better supports effective and efficient student learning.

The reflection activities were generally perceived as difficult. Responses related to participants’ confusion over what to do, what was required, and the timeframe

between the ‘learning’ and the reflection. These findings are consistent with other research suggesting novice students may lack the cognitive skills to reflect [12]. The debate as to whether reflection to foster learning should be loose and unstructured or guided and regular might well have its resolution in the context, i.e. the discipline and the students’ level. We have improved the reflective journal for the next semester to help students develop their reflection skills and learning by including focusing questions and anchoring their reflections to particular stages of the MTS process.

Another important implication of the participants’ comments on reflection relates to the short timeframe between the experience and the reflection. The semester structure and assessment regime presupposes the learning has been realized according to some predetermined schedule. Novice students’ insights into what they have learned may in fact happen much later on their learning journey.

Group work and group skills were a prominent theme across both stages of this research. The time and effort invested by participants in group work, along with the perceived benefits of group work, have important implications for designing experience-based activities that involve groups of learners. Collaboration, personalization, and active involvement in group work and experiential-based learning are benefits supported by the literature. These benefits and the development of group skills were recognized by the participants, despite

the more dominant negative aspects of group work that they detailed. Group size (four members maximum) is an aspect to be carefully considered following these findings. Our research also reiterates earlier work (e.g., [26]) on the significant time demands of experiential group learning, in particular out of class time.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Participants' experiences of the MTS confirm its value as a classroom-based experiential learning activity. Participant data highlights the importance of scaffolding components (referred to as 'laddering' by participants) that lead to the final task and the feedback from tutors and peers to change and improve their project as they develop it. The directness of the experience, the experimentation possible, the translation of abstract marketing principles into a product marketing mix and the active involvement of the students in the learning experience are supported theoretically by the experiential learning model. This research, which identified the characteristics of the MTS activity that are appreciated by the participants, provides empirical support for those features as they are experienced by students doing the learning. Not all the findings were clear-cut. The MTS event and the visual exhibition of the group's product and marketing mix were perceived by some to dominate the group's energy and focus while others endorsed its contribution to concretising the learning approach. The reflective journal exercises were experienced as unstructured and many of the participants found themselves unsure as to how to frame their reflections and how to fulfil the set requirements for this component.

This research is a move from the rhetoric of educationalists and our intuition as tertiary teachers to offering some insights based on first year student experiences and perceptions of experience-based learning. We understand that guided reflection is crucial to realising the potential of the MTS experience for our students. We also appreciate the impact that group work problems can have on individual student learning. As a result of this research, we have already implemented changes to improve the reflection and group work dimensions of the MTS activity.

There are limitations to this research. Some of the students participated merely to gain credits. Participants recruited without this incentive are likely to have supplied different information. Some students also participated because they had something in particular that they wanted to say, often negative, and this may have overemphasized the negative perceptions.

From a teaching perspective, the MTS is a successful experience-based approach to teaching and marketing in a large first year management class course. This research reveals that from a learning perspective, while participants described the MTS as exciting and creative, the activity did cause significant difficulties for some students. Participants also indicated that the nature of

the first year teaching/learning context poses special challenges for experience-based learning initiatives at this level. Such data signals the need to integrate other contemporary teaching/learning pedagogy into experiential learning theory for it to be more effective as a first year learning experience.

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