



# Situated learning and marketing Moving beyond the rational technical thought cage

Barry Ardley

*Lincoln Business School, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – A range of previous studies show that large numbers of practitioners do not adopt the prescriptive model of marketing planning. The research objective was to determine how marketing managers actually do go about making marketing planning decisions and what the consequences of this are for marketing educators.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research methodology is based on a series of in depth interviews carried out with senior marketing managers in a diverse range of business organisations.

**Findings** – Results show that marketing in practice is about a local logic of action, rather than the implementation of systemic theory. Marketing expertise is shown to consist of a broad range of skills, knowledge and experientially-based judgements. As a result of this it is argued that significant implications exist for marketing education.

**Research limitations/implications** – This was a relatively small scale study and the issues it raises could be usefully explored with a range of other respondents who practice marketing in order to uncover their approaches to strategy development and implementation.

**Practical implications** – It is argued that marketing education should take possession of a pedagogic framework based on the concept of situated learning, where full account is taken of the experiential and social basis of knowledge. The paper goes on to outline some approaches based on the idea of situated learning, indicating how they might be best used by marketing educators.

**Originality/value** – This paper shows that the curriculum needs to take account of the argument that marketing reality is constituted by individual interpretation and language and not by a structural framework which sees the person as being conditioned by a rational technical system of marketing knowledge.

**Keywords** Marketing planning, Marketing management, Marketing decision making, Learning

**Paper type** Research paper

## Marketing education: (socially) constructing the future

The intention of this paper is to examine some recent research carried out into the practice of marketing management and then to discuss the ramifications of these findings for marketing education and training. The contention is that the research findings indicate some rethinking is required on how marketing education is theorised and implemented. A central notion proposed here is that a more diverse approach to understanding and implementing marketing education be adopted. This perspective holds an alternative view of knowledge and practice to the current dominant model, which is based on a rational technical premise. The latter approach assumes that marketing issues and problems can be put into a tidy package to be picked up and used in any situation. This prescriptive approach fails, however, to capture the rich diversity of actual marketing practice, as Murray *et al.* (2002) point out. For Cunningham (1999), the one view of marketing sees knowledge as a fixed entity, external to the individual. Alternatively, what the research here suggests is that marketing educators should



consider moving away from the current universal theory. There should be a move instead, to the acceptance of a diverse knowledge base in marketing, one which emphasises individual perceptions of situations, encompassing variety and difference. It is argued in this paper that the latter approach should form the basis of a new type of marketing education, one which reflects more accurately the nature of reality.

It is suggested that planning texts, consultants and some research into marketing, reduce a heterogeneous practical realm into something that is generalisable and immediate. In fact, marketing thought and practice is shown by the managers interviewed in this study, to be open to many and varied interpretations. As McCole (2004) points out, there are ways of doing marketing that are simply not being captured by current approaches to teaching. These new developments include areas like experiential marketing and retro-marketing. Findings also suggest that there are problems with the concept of human agency which is held by the traditional marketing planning model. This issue of human motivations and objectives are never really fully discussed in most texts or research papers. Marketing managers are seen as information processing, determined entities, dictated to by the model of the marketing planning process. Any deviation from this is somehow seen as dysfunctional. Curren *et al.* (1992) provide an example of this. They carried out some research into marketing decision making. As a result of their findings, they argued that marketing manager's make decisions incorrectly, using "self serving biases" rather than rational, logical techniques. Instead, it can be argued that these biases are an inevitable and intrinsic part of any individual's interpretative devices. These biases are unlikely to be ever "corrected" by any directives regarding the need for objective planning methods. Objects and events are always open to diverse interpretations and marketing planning cannot be alone in escaping this imperative.

What the rational technical approach does is to represent a flawed view of human activity in organisations. It is people, their perceptions and the language they use, which are the focal point of marketing activity. The study reported on here, demonstrates that the marketing managers interviewed have drawn on different vocabularies to express and explain their views of the world. Knowledge becomes the outcome of human cognitive construction, an activity that is engaged in perpetually Cunningham (1999). Previous research into marketing like that of Greenley and Bayus (1993), may have been very useful in setting out the issues relevant to the lack of use of marketing models by practitioners, but they actually shed little light on how marketing decisions are made. In trying to understand the latter issue using an interpretivist approach, marketing is no more or no less than what managers say it is (Robson and Rowe, 1997). While this approach may be viewed as being contentious, it does open up a very rich field for discussion, interpretation, and for careful reflection and scrutiny. This would serve important educational goals and arguably, would be much more demanding of the learner, than the current over simplified generalisations of the technical rational model.

### The research design

The research method used in this study was phenomenological, a perspective which views society and organisations as being composed of differing perceptions of reality. This reality has already been made sense of by its adherents and so the researcher must try to understand actor's interpretative devices which provide the background to

action (Silverman, 1970). Moustakas (1994), in discussing data collection, points out that the central technique in phenomenological research is the in-depth interview. The purpose of the interview is to describe and understand the central themes that those being researched experience. The intention of this research project was to get access to a differentiated range of situations, in order to try and make sense of the perceptions of marketing managers' approaches to marketing planning and strategy. In this respect, it was thought that there was no ideal number of companies to research, because it is suggested that each will have a unique approach to marketing and as Garfinkel (1984) points out, there is no master reality to uncover. Participants had to be sought out who could articulate their experiences and the phenomenon dictated the method. Sampling involving notions of generalisability were rejected, as this can be seen as incompatible with an interpretivist approach which sees the data of the study as an end in itself (Hackley, 2003).

Thomas (1993), points out that access in a qualitative study is both time consuming and difficult. With this in mind, considerable effort was put into obtaining and scrutinising a number of lists of local organisations operating in the area of the study. These lists were principally obtained from the local Chamber of Commerce. Over 80 different marketing managers were written to, using a standard letter, asking for interview access. In the end, 24 interviews were completed with marketing managers representing a wide range of small, medium- and large-sized organisations. Respondents came from printing, building contracting, book publishing, meat slicing equipment manufacture, financial services, retailing, computer hardware and software, professional services, public sector leisure, television, consultancy, and a charity. Also interviewed were marketing managers from manufacturers of beauty products, handbags, paint brushes, packaging equipment and small electrical motors. For the purpose of this paper, all respondents and their companies have been made anonymous. Holstein and Gubruim (1997), suggest that for qualitative interviews, an interview guide is constructed, which makes available to the interviewer a set of predetermined questions which can engage the respondent and establish the area of investigation. Such a guide was prepared and used for all interviews. The interview guide for this project was designed to be tentative and contingent and to not resemble the approach used in standardised survey interviewing.

It can be argued that how the interviewee responds to the interviewer is largely attributable to a question of trust. In most cases, rapport was built prior to the interview stage, when arrangements for the latter were being made. This involved telephoning potential respondents and quite often this meant that conversations took place about the nature of the research. By the time of the actual interview, most managers had been spoken to in advance. During the interviews, it was clear that the interviewer was accepted by respondents, and at all times, genuine attempts were made to understand interviewee's experiences in a situation of guaranteed confidentiality. Managers responded openly and candidly to questions due to these efforts of rapport building. The process of rapport building was also enhanced as a result of the interview taking place in a comfortable setting, namely at the managers place of work, a point made by Thomas (1993). All interviews were transcribed professionally. The interviews were reproduced verbatim and nothing missed out. The resulting transcripts were returned to the interviewee for verification, a process Bloor (1978) refers to as respondent validation. The final stage of research involved the

process of phenomenological analysis, where the common mode of presenting findings is through the use of selected quotes. The latter were drawn from the interviews, enabling the process of meaning condensation to occur (Kvale, 1996). Here, the interviewee responses were broken down into meaning units and resulted in a number of general key research themes being identified, which will now be discussed.

### **Marketing management and the local logic of action: a summary of findings**

The interviews quickly revealed that managers had a sound grasp of established marketing principles and terminology, but that they preferred instead, to use an intelligent lay language when discussing marketing strategy and planning. This is very much in line with the findings of Hackley (1998, 2001a). This situation is illustrated by the following finding. Most marketing managers interviewed in this study made sense of marketing in terms of the local context of action, a finding reflecting the concept of indexicality. This is where the sense of any object is derived from its situation (Benson and Hughes, 1983; Boden, 1994). A good illustration of this comes from the managing director of a marketing and design consultancy. In responding to the question of how marketing should be defined and made actionable, the comment was made that:

... because we are in the business of selling marketing, we package it differently, according to the demand we perceive for it, which I believe is only good marketing in itself. So the answer to your question is it moves, it changes.

A similar type of finding was found with regard to the manager's interpretation of the business and market environment. The latter was not found to be a fixed objective entity, but embedded in the local rationality of marketing managers worlds. Managers individually produce aspects of the environment they face, in much the way that Weick (1995) suggests. One manager was asked if he completed an environmental analysis. He replied by saying "No, No ... I just want to know how the opposition is disposed around me ...". Further findings from the research indicate that marketing plans are written, but they are not driven by the traditional prescriptive approach. For Weick (2001), if environments are locally constructed, then in consequence, plans must be as well. At an engineering company the marketing manager made the following speculation about this diversity of approaches to writing marketing plans:

I suppose to some extent it does tend to be a black art. As I say, half a dozen customers can be doing the same thing manufacture the same product, but they are all doing it in a slightly different way, and their way is best.

The metaphor being used here, suggestive of marketing as a black art, indicates that the knowledge being referred to is not easily acquired, being secretive and esoteric in nature. To fully understand the codes and ways of the industry, one would have to be initiated into it and learn from others. This approach opens up a rich source of work-based marketing learning for students. Research findings appeared to indicate a firm reliance on these types of metaphors to explain action. Although the broad meanings of metaphors are often socially shared, the case here was that they appeared to be subjectively interpreted, representing an individually constructed perspective on the world. In the interviews, this approach seemed evident in terms of how the managers thought and acted on marketing issues. For Shankar *et al.* (2001), metaphors represent one of the main types of human argument. A number of writers recommend

them as analytic devices for use with interview transcripts; see, for example, Tsoukas (1991) and Miles and Huberman (1994).

With regard to the use of the planning tools of marketing Brown (2001), indicates that these are not sacred magic squares that solve strategic marketing problems. Interviews here show that portfolio tools are blunt instruments of analysis, if not used in conjunction with a sound basis of local contextual knowledge and experience. As one manager put it:

... those principles and theories need to be understood ... but if you just religiously adopt a dogma ... you know, there is a kind of quest for the truth here. There is no truth.

At a fundamental level, it can be argued that there are no fundamental marketing truths, as what goes on in organisations, in the name of marketing, is context and language dependent (Hackley, 2001b). The implications of this means that rather than just learning about one the way to do marketing, students should be exposed to a range of other, equally valid approaches.

Another dimension of untapped marketing, knowledge, which students should be exposed to, is represented by the possession of tacit knowledge (Baumard, 1999). With regard to marketing, Hackley (1999), states the area of tacit knowledge refers to action which is left out of abstracted theoretical descriptions, on which the accomplishment of action depends. This notion of the tacit is strongly reflected in this study, and expressed here through the words of a marketing director of a printing company:

You have ... the conscious incompetence, and the unconscious incompetence, the conscious competence and the unconscious competence and when marketing philosophy gets into the unconscious competence you know what is the right thing to do instinctively.

What this study also found out was that in terms of marketing outcomes, the most significant variables were not those of the marketing mix, illustrating again that the traditional marketing format does not feature here. Instead, what figured strongly were relationships, quality and service. This largely reflects the thinking and experiences of Gummesson (2002a). At one of the UK's biggest publishers, the marketing directors following comments reflect some of this thinking:

... in the marketing plan you will not see the four Ps... it becomes a bit slavish ... I would rather talk about understanding markets, understanding how you reach end-users, and how understanding how you continue your business as usual, sales to those markets, how you get incremental sales to those markets, how you get loyalty, so during the year we have got a growing loyal base.

In terms of marketing education, the reality reported on here is in stark contrast to what students learn. Large numbers of marketing courses are predicated on the notion that it is the four Ps of the marketing mix which structures action in organisations (Gummesson, 2002b). Despite the presence of a number of articles like the ones by Gronross (1994) and Webster (1992), suggesting that the four Ps are an increasingly redundant way to view marketing, the conventional mix elements are still a very real presence in most student textbooks. What is taught fails to reflect not only the nuances of reality, but also major developments in some areas of marketing thinking, for example in the work of Brown (2003). Additionally, this study found that marketing strategy emerges not out of linear marketing plans as much traditional marketing teaching suggests, but out of current situations and opportunities. One way this

develops is from within relationships and networks, where “talk” is very important in terms of decision making. At a major building contractor the marketing manager outlined the role of reciprocity, where she has to empathise with significant others in her network:

You know, we always try to be very nice to people, because you never know what you might need yourself. I mean, I have to speak to people and try and get work from people, so I always put myself in other people’s shoes.

A number of managers focused on local relationships at the expense of marketing’s analytical tools. One made the point that the Boston matrix was:

... good to talk about over the dinner table maybe, but I didn’t really find there was proper use for it ... I know what we can do ... it is a matter of getting out finding out who to talk to, going to see them, building relationships and you do that as much by personality, as Boston Matrixes.

For many managers in this study the work is about being immersed in what Weick (1995) calls a situation of “thrownness” where strategy develops out of current situations and opportunities. The marketing director of the printing company previously mentioned, pointed out that:

Inevitably the day to day tends to overwhelm the long term because it is usual fighting alligators isn’t it. I think most of the time you are fighting alligators in the swamp ...

Finally, the research makes it clear that although the marketing managers in this study write plans, they do not follow them very closely. This does not mean the role of these plans is unimportant, however. The plans act as a point of reference, generating cognitive activity. What appears to be the case is that from the plans cues are extracted, which evoke action. For Weick (2001), any old plan will work in an organisation because it is often sufficient to get the company moving. One of the managers talked about these types of plans as necessary features because ... “if you didn’t have the plan, you would be a rudderless ship.” It is clear from this study that action and meaning in local contexts is not primarily drawn from analytical marketing models, but from the individual judgements made by actors on issues as wide ranging as strategic responses to relationships, marketing mixes, and emergent strategy. In dealing with this issue, it is necessary to recognise that reality is much more complex, interactive and dynamic than is presented by the technical rational model. What dominates marketing practice in the firms of this study is a local logic of action, rather than adherence to a standard prescriptive model. A pressing concern for marketing education is that the curriculum starts to come to terms with this alternative knowledge base.

### **Technical rationality and marketing knowledge**

Drawn from the research findings, what the emphasis on metaphors, language, and local experience achieves in doing is to critically address the current and dominant structure of knowledge, as it is presented in marketing education. In developing a critique of marketing conventions, it can be argued that in the latter there is present a strong tendency towards establishing a reductionist technical rationality (Dunne, 1999). In marketing education and training, one mode of rationality has established ascendancy. Knowledge assembled and activity conducted within its framework is

recognised as the respected form. Context dependent frames of reference, the type of which are reported in the research, outlined above, are often suppressed in favour of the marketing planning frameworks of writers like McDonald (1999).

This technical paradigm is based in the notion of “Techne” (Baumard, 1999, pp. 20-2), where matter form is at the disposal of the producer, who can construct a design for planning and execution. To technicise a practice involves decomposing it into discrete tasks and then analysing systematically the elements necessary for successful performance of these tasks. This involves disembedding the knowledge or skills implicit in the performance from the immediacy of the particular situation (Dunne, 1999). The knowledge is encapsulated then in explicit generalisable procedures and rules, as is the case with marketing planning (Brownlie and Spender, 1995). In the conventional model, the tasks of marketing planning involve, for example, the setting of discrete objectives and then the development of strategies. These rules can then be applied to the various situations that arise in practice, so as to meet problems. In the research, this process has been rarely encountered, as strategy usually emerges out of action. Furthermore, plans do not appear to act as rules, but as intuitive guides.

For Dunne (1999) and Brownlie and Spender (1995), at the heart of practitioner knowledge is judgement, which is invested in action. It is knowledge about dealing with the situation as it is now, which may deviate from the standard theory. To use judgement, means to respect the individuality of the situation. It does not mean imposing on it a general rule alone. Brief and Dukerich (1991), also question the acceptance of general rules in organisational behaviour and argue that theory should act as an idea generator, indicating a course of action, but not prescribing it. If marketing is composed of different realities dependent on context and individual perceptions, then it is important that these perspectives get opened up for debate in marketing education. This should mean that marketing knowledge should be seen as:

... something to be evaluated, compared, considered, reinterpreted, always shifting and infinitely contestable ... (Hackley, 2001b, p. 171).

In providing a framework for explaining what is going on here, Baumard (1999, p. 53), uses the Greek word “Phronesis” to describe what is non scientific and practical. This is contextual knowledge, generated by lived experience. In terms of developing and implanting a marketing strategy, what managers do is more complex and nuanced than can be rendered in an explicit account. Judgement is not assured by exposure to the general principles, but has to be mediated by experience. A key implication here is that much marketing is learnt in the context of the job and the organisation, an issue that the research of Hackley (2001a) on work in advertising agencies appears to support. It is argued that there is too much of an extended engagement with the technicist marketing tradition, which on its own, does not provide students, young professionals or developing marketing managers, with what is required to perform effectively. Successful organisations, where tasks are complex, are ones with an inbuilt tolerance for uncertainty. Managers in this study seem to recognise this point, where issues are often reconfigured outside of the traditional framework. Jones (1990) indicates that it is the knowledge as practical experience view which must prevail if we are to deal effectively with management education. As Ottensen and Gronhaug (2004) argue, declarative contextual knowledge is needed by firms if they are to operate effectively. Learning in working thus becomes an occupational necessity.

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### Communities of practice and marketing education

The next sections of this paper offer up alternative modes of learning about marketing. A key concept which binds together the three approaches to be considered below is the notion of communities of practice. Significantly, learning has been shown, by the managers in this study, to take place within the context and framework of social participation. This is achieved through interactions, in networks, through talk and relationships. Clearly, the differences in perspective among co-participants are instrumental in generating learning. What this suggests is that an important source of practical, workable knowledge is through the concept of communities of practice. For Wenger and Snyder (2000), communities of practice represent learning through doing. In an earlier work Lave and Wenger (1991), describe communities of practice as systems of relationships between people, the activities they are involved in and the world. These elements are regarded as being an important condition for the existence of knowledge. It becomes important then that in learning about marketing, a full account is taken of practice. From out of this practice, it is argued that people principally learn how to think and enact marketing as a locally enacted phenomenon.

Brownlie and Spender (1995), also point to the importance of communities of practice. They argue that the process of acquiring the experience which shapes managerial judgement can be gained by the novice through working with those who have already demonstrated ownership of the appropriate abilities, where practice is central to understanding work. The abstractions of much current marketing theory, contained in technical rational descriptions, can distort or obscure the intricacies of that practice. Without a clear understanding of those intricacies and the role they play in the organisation, practice itself cannot be well understood or engendered. Brown and Duguid (1991), suggest that the ability of people to learn in the situation indicates that all attempts to strip away context should be cautiously examined. Didactic approaches, on their own, have the tendency to separate learners from authentic work practices. Technical rational theories and models of learning, which are strongly implicated in the documented view of marketing, see the whole process as mainly being about the transmission of explicit abstract knowledge from the head of an expert, to that of one who knows relatively little. In conventional marketing courses, this knowledge is often communicated in surroundings that specifically exclude the complexities of marketing practice and the setting for this is often assumed not to matter.

### Situated learning and education (1): marketing management competencies

This paper now outlines three approaches which draw on the idea of communities of practice and the role of situated learning. The first approach to consider is presented by Hill *et al.* (1998). They suggest that academics and practitioners need to close the theory practice gap in respect of the marketing planning barriers that have been identified by McDonald (1989). Hill *et al.* (1998), postulate that the competent marketing planner is one who, when observed, demonstrates that he or she is competent in respect of a particular activity. The competency framework approach indicates that some marketing tasks and techniques are common to the effective performance of all managers. The work-based competency model recognises that the individual circumstances and environment of the manager are important, as pointed out by Driver (1990). The latter indicates that in terms of marketing planning, there should be adequate recognition of the variety of its forms and the manner and extent of its conduct.



Hill *et al.* (1998), recognise the point that there has been in marketing a quest for the pursuit of objective knowledge, coupled with the assumption that once acquired, this knowledge can be codified and transmitted in the classroom as universal laws. The suggestion of Hill *et al.* (1998), is that this has led to the split between practice and theory, where in fact there is clearly a need for these two areas to be integrated much more. Learning it is argued, can be meaningfully derived from the actual experience of undertaking work activities. They argue that the potential for this type of learning has frequently been ignored by academics as a valid source of knowledge, because it raises questions about the authority of established modes of delivery. For Hill *et al.* (1998), a full work-based learning approach recognises that there is a curriculum in the workplace. Through a community of practice, which uses the competency approach, the student is put at the centre of teaching, by examining learning needs in the respect of their current workplace. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach is advocated and introduced, as it is argued that requirements in a work situation are not just reliant on a single discipline. Importantly, this perspective enables factors like judgement and interactions with others to be viewed as key attributes which need to be acquired by the learner.

Hill *et al.* (1998), indicate that a competency-based programme was introduced by the University of Ulster, with the aim of assisting company managers to develop their marketing planning abilities. Students were expected to construct work books where records of decisions made were kept (Hill *et al.*, 1998). In the competency areas of knowledge, experience, analytical skills, leadership, vision, judgement, organisational ability and commitment, members were expected to focus on their strengths and weaknesses. In response to this, participants were exposed to methods which sought to develop the key marketing planning competencies. Importantly, there was a good degree of work-based outside the prescriptive marketing framework, as shown by Hill *et al.* (1998). Participants were encouraged to discuss their own individual ways of doing business, where they were encouraged to relay their own experience and to experiment with new ways of doing things. This clearly represents a move towards a more practically-based knowledge and should become more central in marketing education, as it could be adapted to the needs of full time, as well as part time students.

### **Situated learning and marketing education (2): the action research perspective**

For Laurent and Pras (1999), there is need for marketing academics to put more focus on real problems. Action researchers can be either in house or external, where the central focus is on the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation (Gill and Johnson, 1997). In marketing, Wilson (2004) reports on an action research study into planning. Generally, however, there is actually very little work of this nature presented in the marketing journals, indicating that the model of research which is dominant still rests very much on the natural science mode of inquiry (Gronhaug and Olson, 1999). It is argued here that more marketing academics should adopt the roles of action researchers, rather than being as they are at present, the definitive assessors of marketing activity. Instead, actions taken will be based on speculation and analysis of a particular situation, rather than with the testing and verification of a hypothesis. The focus is on solving a practitioner's problems, using a divergent knowledge base to offer up ways to move forward. Arndt (1985), refers to

this as the liberating paradigm, where what passes for reality is socially created and maintained. Knowledge gained from action research projects could be widely disseminated to students for study and reflection, widening up the parameters of understanding.

It could also be possible for students to undertake action research in organisations as well. This could be in the form of addressing a common problem in organisations, like the adoption of a marketing orientation. The student as action researcher would need to specify in detail the nature of the marketing orientation problem and contract with the company in terms of identifying what is required as to the outcome. Action research in the organisation could involve the carrying out of in depth interviews, observations, the examination of documents and the execution of questionnaires. The researcher would become involved in the work processes of the organisation, by taking on a particular role. After sufficient research had been completed, a diagnosis could take place and then action could be recommended and implemented. An evaluation of the success of the course of action could then be done and written up.

There exists in the action research approach, little concern for the development of universal theory. Action research is not driven by abstraction, but by the problem in hand, as suggested by organisational members. Work which is conducted is particularistic and context centred, demanding the researcher to have contact and interaction with clients. As such, this represents an opportunity to develop specific theories of marketing in action. It can also be viewed as a departure from the traditional idea of research, which is to see it as distant and objective (Gronhaug and Olson, 1999). The intention is that by being enmeshed in the local context of an organisation and its community of practice, a theory is developed by the action researcher, which can help the local practitioner. This should be a practically useful, rather than a prescriptive theory.

In the research study reported on above, each manager can be seen to approach marketing action differently and as a consequence, the marketing planning problems they experience are different as well. An action researcher could evaluate these problems and offer up new ideas based on the manager's individual situation. The metaphors used by managers could well be utilised for diagnosis and intervention, in much the same way Clegg and Grey (1996) study of leadership. Additionally, the deliberate use of metaphors in action research could offer another way out of the cage of thought and language which has been constructed by the dominance of the technical rationality and systems paradigm in marketing. The development of theory in this context, has to be viewed not as a set of interconnected generalisable prescriptions, but as helping to provide concepts which can alter perceptions and suggest new paths of action. In a marketing context, it is often assumed that the actions of managers should proceed because they are supported by certain, verified laws, a view largely incompatible with the action research approach. Articles appearing in marketing journals, written from an action research perspective, might mean that academics would overcome the problem where they are seen to be writing only for each other and not for practitioners, see McKenzie *et al.* (2001).

### **Situated learning and marketing education (3): action learning**

Action learning emphasises learning by doing (Kable, 1989). Mumford (1991) recommends that the best form for action learning is for participants to work on a

defined topic which is significant to the individuals themselves and which results in effective action. People learn from experience, share that experience with others and have those colleagues criticise and advise. It is very much a social approach to learning, where different communities of practice have the opportunity to interact and learn from each other. The term “comrades in adversity” approach (Margerison, 1988, p. 43), describes the basis for assessing how to improve ones own individual skills and the tasks which have to be performed. McGill and Beaty (2001) have used action learning for part time students on academic and professional courses, for full time students to support project work and for the study of issues within organisations using employees. The action research approach draws on the work of Revans (1980), which emphasises reflection, learning by experience, and the sharing of this knowledge in a social context. In practice, action learning involves a collection of people known as a set, who work together for a compact period of time. The whole approach broadly follows Kolb *et al.*'s (1984) model of the learning process, where each member takes action on their own issues after reflection with the group.

In terms of how learning occurs, or what can be termed as the learning cycle, action learning involves experimentation, which is doing the job, or dealing with the problem. This should be accompanied by some reflective observation of the experience by the learner. These two related aspects of learning can then be brought together perhaps in a different location, where abstract conceptualisation can take place. Following on from this, it would then be possible to test the implications of these concepts in new situations. In an action learning context, Margerison (1988), argues that the philosophy and methods of learning have got to get close to the course participants life existence and reality. In a course for practising managers, the metaphors that they use could be explored in order to get close to that life existence. In a learning situation, getting learners to use diverse metaphors to explain action could mean that a conscious pluralism is encouraged. This conscious variety would facilitate critical discussion amongst action learners, producing an agenda enabling managers to confront different perspectives, provided by the different metaphors in use. Full time students could be given projects in companies and asked to look at marketing management in the context of the metaphors of practice used by managers. In a study of organisational behaviour, Dunford and Palmer (1996), asked practising managers to reflect on the metaphorical frames they used in the workplace. New and different perceptions, based on metaphors, could indicate new paths of action. In similar way, students either full or part time on an action learning project, could be assigned to different companies and asked to prepare a new marketing strategy for that organisation. McLoughlin (2004), reports on one such well established and successful action learning programme in marketing which uses the techniques outlined above. In this way, new approaches are being encouraged and developed which move away from the technically rational model, to one which uses students own constructions of situations. In general terms Jones-Evans *et al.* (2000) are still right, however, when they point out that the whole process of action learning represents the development of a new paradigm in business education.

### **Conclusion: engaging with the situated learning approach in marketing education**

Pfeffer and Fong (2002, p. 85), note that in only a few instances, do business schools implement the experiential approach of learning by doing. “Students learn to talk

about business, but it is not clear that they learn business". The same comment could equally apply to marketing education. A key proposition of this paper is that knowledge of the world is enacted, with its basis in interpretative understanding (Addleson, 1996; Daft and Weick, 1984). This challenges the traditional approach to marketing. Instead of looking for problems and their resolution in systems and structures of knowledge, the focus shifts to one concerned with engaging with how people constitute their understanding, in order to explain what is going on in the world. Using an interpretivist perspective, it can be said that what people know is how they see. Knowing and learning is not simply about accumulating and storing knowledge about marketing models and theories, or just about building up facts about marketing. Futures are shaped not by linear marketing plans, but by what people learn in the course of time and then act on incrementally, through relationships with others. The world is continuous and dynamic, yet marketing students are encouraged to resort to absolute categories when trying to understand it, trapping them in misconceptions about how organisations actually work.

Apart from the earlier mentioned example of McLoughlin (2004), there is additional evidence to show that some other institutions providing marketing degrees are successfully adopting an approach which is based on the alternative experiential learning framework. One example is at Lincoln University (Taylor, 2005), where a third year undergraduate unit is in operation based on a client consultancy project. Students are given a marketing management problem to resolve by a local company. Working in small groups, course participants are expected to develop this problem into a research question, where a brief is prepared in conjunction with the company. Students work independently on the subsequent project, carrying out research and analysis, with a supervising tutor who acts as a guide and facilitator. Students are then encouraged to prepare their own strategy for the company, who are involved throughout the duration of the project. The latter might be based on issues such as increasing sales, or finding new markets for a product. At the end of the unit a presentation is made to the company and a report is written up. The structure and operation of this unit can clearly be seen to draw on features of action learning, where the latter is social, reflective and experiential. Importantly, the unit extends beyond rehearsing purely technical marketing ability, to incorporate some key skills that employers require, like team work, interpersonal skills, report writing and negotiation (Cunningham, 1999). Using this approach means that learning becomes multidisciplinary as well, because few marketing problems do not encompass information technology, knowledge management and numbers (Evans *et al.*, 2002).

In conclusion, a major problem for marketing education at present is that conventional models privilege a neutral describing language over the complexity of everyday talk and meaning. As such, there is a degree of over simplification inherent in terms like "planning" and "strategy" which become reduced in mainstream marketing education to purely technical issues. The work place is about much more than this and in many respects, is intensely qualitative. Issues of interpretation, culture, tacit knowledge, relationships and networks play a very significant role in work situations and these must be brought into the marketing curriculum. Bennis and O'Toole (2005), in discussing the MBA curriculum, point out that many lecturers are outstanding fact collectors, giving good instruction on scientific methodology, but are uncomfortable in dealing with multidisciplinary issues in the classroom. Precisely the same problem

faces marketing educators. Marketing management and strategy cannot be divorced from issues of organisational behaviour, sociology, culture, hermeneutics and psychology. If students fail to understand how people make meaning in organisations, respond to others and their environments, then the marketing education project is built on shaky ground. This is even before it begins to examine the notion of the customer. By looking at and engaging with the broad area of situated learning, then some attempt at least would be made to start tackling this problem. A key challenge for marketing educators then, is a need to be a move aside from the reliance on the current technical rational model, to build new acceptable non reified theories that incorporate features of marketing management which exist in practice, but which lay outside current textual knowledge.

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