



The student practitioner

Developing skills through the marketing research consultancy project

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions of a group of undergraduate students undertaking marketing research consultancy projects for employers. The projects are informed by action learning. The intention is to demonstrate that this method of learning facilitates a level of student skill development that more traditional marketing courses find difficult to achieve.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is underpinned by an interpretivist approach. Research involved students taking part in two focus groups during the consultancy and the completion of pre- and post-consultancy open-ended questionnaires.

Findings – Findings suggest that the marketing consultancy project represents a way to help develop the general skills required by novice marketers. Students show an understanding of the importance of acquiring communicative, interpersonal, creative and team-based skills. These assist them in developing a practical knowledge neglected by much existing marketing teaching.

Research limitations/implications – The findings although based on a small sample, indicate that marketing education if based on action learning, positively engages learners. The emphasis on practice suggests that experience, work place socialisation and tacit knowledge, are essential components of learning about marketing that often get overlooked in more traditional marketing courses.

Originality/value – This paper suggests that much established marketing education does not take sufficient account of experiential based learning and instead, is wedded to a model of teaching that sees marketing as being mainly about the transmission of administratively based knowledge. This paper argues that relying overly on the latter will not provide tomorrow's marketers with an appropriate skill set for employment.

Keywords Action learning, Undergraduates, Skills, Marketing, Focus groups

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: the marketing skills debate and an agenda for action learning

The issue of the state of marketing skills education and the extent to which these adequately prepare students for employment, have been widely discussed not only in *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, but elsewhere as well (Taylor, 2003; Brennan and Ankers, 2004; Gray *et al.*, 2007; Hyman and Hu, 2005; Davies *et al.*, 2002; Hill *et al.*, 1998). Both Evans *et al.* (2002) and Lynch (2008) argue that marketers need to possess more of well-rounded skill set for modern working, a point reflected in the research of Martin and Chapman (2006). The latter argue that traditional marketing courses are too narrow and students, particularly if they are going to work in SME marketing, need a broader skill base. McCole (2004) raises the point that academia fails to fully understand how marketing is actually carried out in practice and consequently, large parts of what is taught are inappropriate. Central to the whole debate here is the actual skills marketing graduates require and whether or not current educational practices are adequately equipping them to meet the demands of a changing and complex work environment. Cunningham (1999) suggests that much more emphasis needs to be put



on the development of team working and learning by doing, rather than on the transmission of abstract, technical knowledge. Dacko (2006) has noted the importance and relevance of the “how to skills” with research which highlights skill weaknesses in graduate marketers, in areas such as negotiation, problem formulation and leadership. The lack of the former of these skills is also noted by the research of Stringfellow *et al.* (2006). Significantly, Taylor (2003) points out that employers are increasingly focussing on hiring applicants for marketing positions who can demonstrate skills that will help them perform well on the job.

The emphasis on the need to develop in new marketers more general skill sets is highlighted by the Marketing and Sales Standard Setting Body (MSSB, 2010). This body has also produced evidence to show that employers are less concerned about the subject of the degree, more on the possession of graduate skills. Wellman (2008) poses the all important question “Are marketing degrees fit for purpose?” This paper contends that in particular ways they are not, arguing that there is a need to rethink some of the ways in which marketing students are taught. The contention here is that marketing education does not take sufficient account of experiential-based learning methods and instead, is wedded to a model of marketing teaching that is seen as being mainly about the transmission of administratively based knowledge. Administrative-based marketing is a term largely associated with the research of Hills *et al.* (2008). In their work, they show that a major preoccupation of the academy is the understanding of marketing in terms of a series of objective, largely bureaucratic linear steps which students must learn and then be able to regurgitate as necessary (Cunningham, 1999; Hills *et al.*, 2008; Hackley, 2009). For Hills *et al.* (2008), the administrative marketing framework has limited use, failing to provide a sufficiently nuanced view of the world and the types of activities marketers actually undertake. The key objective of this paper is to show that marketing student’s skill levels in a variety of areas are positively influenced by exposure to experiential based learning methods. Rather than ingesting a continuous diet of education based largely on an administrative model of marketing, this paper will show that students enthusiastically embrace an approach to learning that enables them to experience and analyse marketing as it happens in a work based context.

As a consequence, this paper advocates the use of action learning programmes in university marketing education. A central issue that this perspective deals with is that when students learn about marketing, it is not just a question of them simply engaging in theory accumulation, but of learning also, about how to become a practitioner (McGill and Beaty, 2001). Importantly though, this should not be the only approach to pedagogical design. Whilst it is clearly important for students to acquire the skills necessary for an effective working life, it can also be argued that marketing education should not merely be about the procedural activity of managerial problem solving, but act to engage students in critical reflection. Criticism can mean and take a variety of forms in an educational context. It should be able to sit alongside the type of action learning module this paper proposes. For Mingers (2000), all management courses, which by implication includes marketing, should contain a critical element organised around a range of guiding principles. These include for example, the need to be sceptical of established principles and the idea of value-free knowledge. Alternatively, it is conceivable that critical marketing studies modules be offered, in order to connect studies to some of the deeper intellectual arguments that exist around the discipline (Hackley, 2009). Controversial issues could be examined,

like marketing's relationships with the physical environment, the disciplines tendency to universalise theory, the promulgation of models of the consumer based on individual self-interest and marketing's apparent exclusive focus on profit (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008; Saren *et al.*, 2007).

Lincoln Business School and the student consultancy project

The general argument in this paper, regarding the utility of an action-learning approach to engage students through appropriate experiences, is supported by reference to research carried out at Lincoln University, UK, with a group of marketing students. In the Lincoln Business School (Taylor, 2009), a third-year undergraduate module is in operation, for single honours marketing students, which is based on a marketing research consultancy activity, hence forth referred to as the MRC project. This module, unlike many others that marketing students study is based on the philosophy and methods of action learning (Jones, 1990; McGill and Beaty, 2001). The year-long module, which sits alongside other marketing modules on the third year of the full-time course, is designed principally, to expose students to learning in the workplace rather than in the classroom. In the first part of the module, the focus is on giving students a sufficient level of skills and knowledge to enable them, in the second part of the module, to work with a client organisation. Course participants study areas including the writing of a brief, negotiation, preparing results and executing a range of research methods. In the second part of the module, students are given an actual marketing management problem to resolve, usually relating to customers. Client companies are expected to pay a small fee for the services of the students, providing a degree of realism. Working in small self-selective groups, course participants are expected to develop this problem into a research question, where a brief – a set of objectives – is prepared in conjunction with the client 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 marketing strategy for the company in response to the set problem. As a consequence, students need to employ a wide range of skills in order to complete the project successfully. These skills can include for example negotiation, the application of numeracy, teamwork, competitive analysis, problem solving, creativity, and communication in a variety of forms. The client company is involved throughout the duration of the project in a mentoring role. A wide range of local companies are involved in the project. Companies to date have included those selling locally produced soaps, document handlers, steel manufacturers, an interior designer, the local cathedral and charities. The sorts of problems the student group might be asked to respond to may include issues such as attempts to increase sales, finding new markets and market segments for a product. Alternatively, students may be asked to report on consumer responses to a range of marketing initiatives and then suggest changes to current strategy. At the end of the module, a presentation is made to the company and a report written up, both marked by the tutor. A representative from the company provides oral feedback. Importantly, these are real business activities where students must try to use the skills and knowledge they have to the best of their abilities in order to successfully complete a live project.

Research design and method

The research method used in this study was underpinned by an interpretative perspective (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Drawing on qualitative methods, the research sought to obtain access to the perceptions of students on the Lincoln MRC project. Hackley (2003) points out that an interpretivist approach is designed to generate written accounts of experience as data and in line with this, the research was intended to elicit some in-depth understanding of the issues discussed above. Data were not generated in an attempt to excavate universal truths. The research here is idiographic, not an antecedent to a quantitative statistical study. The intention was to generate insight into the ways in which the social reality of those on the MRC course is constructed. As a consequence, the sampling approach adopted is based on the suitability of the student group in terms of the problem being investigated. The 16 respondents in the convenience sample were selected with the intention being of analysing the impact of the MRC project's learning methods on their skill set. Sampling involving notions of generalisability to some external reality were not applicable in this case, as researchers were seeking the views of course participants studying in one location. This type of concern with generalisability can be seen as being incompatible with an interpretive approach which sees the data of the study as meaningful and as an end in itself (Hackley, 2003).

The study involved four separate but linked pieces of research, representing at the time, the total number of students studying for a single honours marketing award in the Lincoln Business School. The sample is analogous to the wider student body studying marketing and it is argued here that the implications of the findings of this study have the potential for much wider consideration and application in marketing and business education generally. At the end of the first semester, before undertaking the MRC project, students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire with the aim of establishing what they expected to gain from the placement with the company and also, what they thought about the marketing degree currently being studied. Students were asked questions about the value of textbooks, the lecture and seminar programme across the degree and what marketing skills they thought were being achieved and what would be achieved, as a result of the MRC project. Later, whilst the MRC project was underway, two focus group interviews, each with eight student members and a moderator, took place. A range of issues, reflecting the objectives of the study, concerned with marketing skills and their acquisition, were discussed, which allowed for the deeper elaboration of thoughts and opinions, not possible in the open-ended questionnaires. Finally, on completion of the MRC work with employers, a second open-ended questionnaire was given to all 16 students asking them to provide general feedback on the experience. Questions were directed at finding out what skills students thought they had acquired as a result of the MRC project, how the project might impact on their employability and what they now thought about the rest of their marketing degree. With regard to both questionnaire and focus groups, it would have been useful to have done a pilot of the research, but time was a limiting factor with both student access and availability becoming increasingly restricted as the academic year moved on, making it difficult to carry out research on the target group.

All the open-ended questions were self-completed by respondents, enabling relatively full answers to be compiled in a situation unencumbered by the constraints of a structured quantitative questionnaire (Bradley, 2007). The latter points out that

open-ended questions have the advantage of providing full answers and make possible the exploration of issues, a key aim of interpretative-based research (Hackley, 2003). Research therefore spanned a time period from the end of semester one to almost the end of semester two. The pre-consultancy preparation phase was covered, the consultancy project itself and then the post-consultancy phase. In terms of the eventual data analysis, both the two questionnaires and two focus group interviews were analysed in order to understand and write up the emergent key themes. These were selected in terms of their relevance to the skills debate in marketing education and to the objectives of this study. These themes appear in this paper as a series of quotes, reflecting a process used in presenting interpretative data (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). In the next section, focus group and questionnaire comments are considered interchangeably. Both are compatible in terms of being qualitative in nature, the only difference being that the focus group has longer questions and longer responses. What follows is a discussion of the key findings of the research, considered in relation to some of the important literature on the topic.

Findings: doing and learning marketing in practice

Team working, communication and interaction

In the context of teamwork, Cunningham (1999) makes some important points. Drawing on findings from a research project of 400 marketing practitioners aimed at identifying employer satisfaction with graduate skill levels, he notes that 97 per cent felt teamwork was essential, but that only 57 per cent of graduates were adequately equipped in this area. The same research illustrated that successful marketing practitioners rated the ability to get on with people as the most important attribute graduates could possess. On the MRC project, students generally found the opportunity to work in teams to be a very affirmative experience, recognising it as being a central skill for work, as reflected in the following two responses drawn from the post-consultancy open-ended questionnaires. For one student, the MRC project:

Improved my knowledge and confidence in working in a team and improved my confidence in gaining information.

A second respondent noted that the MRC project:

Was very positive, it's been good to work in teams and try to put theory and knowledge into practice and trying to undertake research.

The research of Dacko (2006) largely supports the importance Cunningham attaches to teamwork. In a survey of marketing practitioners, the former found that interpersonal skills was ranked highly by marketing professionals, along with the ability to work in a team. The work of Fleisher and Wright (2008), in completing the initial stages of a major piece of funded research into the skills needed by marketing competitive analysts, found that the latter have to routinely work with others, with final outcomes of a project often being a joint effort. The MRC closely mirrors this. Other students on the MRC project take up this issue of teamwork, clearly recognising that the course provides them with this important skill for working in marketing. The open-ended post-consultancy questionnaire indicates that the MRC course provided:

Insight into working in a team for a business type project [...]

And in the case where students had to work with a start-up venture, the MRC project showed them that:

Team work is important and putting together a report for somebody with little marketing experience or knowledge and making it relevant to them.

In one of the focus groups, a respondent said that the following was a positive outcome of the MRC project:

Interacting with clients, and communicating in the real world with clients rather than talking about all the models that we talk about here on the course.

Tacit knowledge, experience and skill development

As highlighted earlier, there is an additionally important implication represented here by the ability of marketing graduates, and indeed marketers generally, to interact in teams effectively. The area in question is that of tacit knowledge, a central aspect of marketing in practice that is routinely ignored by much of the traditional administrative approach (Hackley, 1999; Ardley, 2006; Tapp, 2004). In the case of the explicit, knowledge is codifiable and transmitted in a formal and systematic language, whereas tacit is personal and often difficult to convey and express to those outside the area of expertise in question (Baumard, 1999). For students on the MRC project, there appears to be recognition that the workplace is not just about being able to demonstrate explicit marketing knowledge. They see it as involving other experiential factors that elude the familiar textbooks used on marketing degrees. In the pre-consultancy questionnaire, it was pointed out by one student that the MRC course will:

Put marketing into a real environment where models and concepts may not always work.

Beyond the marketing models lays another reality then. Hackley (1999) argues the tacit area of practical knowledge refers to action which is left out of abstracted theoretical descriptions, but on which the accomplishment of action depends. Hackley goes on to argue that a person who is highly accomplished in strategic marketing decision making, is likely to be able to utilise difficult and experientially mediated concepts in coping with marketing issues. In the majority of standard student marketing texts, a deep silence exists with regard to the area of tacit knowledge. This is an oversight. Tapp (2004) notes that in socialisation, tacit knowledge is exchanged through jointly performed activities as individuals spend time together. From another professional area, Hindmarsh and Pilnick (2002), in looking at the practical accomplishment of work in operating theatres, illustrate that in anaesthesia, tacit knowledge and teamwork are central to the acquisition of expertise. From a practical, rather than from a textual perspective, socialisation can be seen as being the basis of knowledge transfer in organisations, where communities of practice are crucial (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). One respondent on the MRC course picked up on this, noting how knowledge is created in social situations by team interaction. It was stated in the post-consultancy questionnaire that the MRC project had enabled the individual to:

Learn to work in a team where we shared the knowledge of the team and developed more ideas.

From the learning about marketing perspective, understanding tacit knowledge, which is embedded in experience, can lead to skill development if nurtured correctly. For Hill *et al.* (1998), an extremely important component of their work based learning programme at the University of Ulster was the acquisition by students of experience. Having undertaken a marketing activity, they could reflect on that experience and learn from it. On the Lincoln MRC project, the post-work logs completed by students

provide the facility for reflection on their own individual and group experiences. Through working with client companies, it is highly likely that students will make use of the firm's stock of tacit knowledge and build it into their review discussion, where it will feed into the individuals own skill development. As a result, The MRC students clearly recognise the indispensable role of experience and its role in developing their marketing expertise. One respondent in a focus group reflected that the MRC project had helped them to:

“Gain knowledge and experience working with real companies.” Another student in the post consultancy questionnaire noted that the project was invaluable, “because it has given me a huge amount of real world experience”.

Creativity as a marketing skill

In the focus group, one respondent commented that in terms of modules being studied on their marketing degree:

It was fixed on the theories rather than on doing modules which help you develop marketing skills, things that will help you later on in life, we should for example be doing more creative things [..]

This last quote clearly raises the issue of creativity as a skill, which is arguably fundamental to successful marketing performance. The notion of what constitutes creativity and how it is achieved is clearly an intricate issue. One way to define it might be to say that it is simply an important innovation, where change occurs through some form of reorganisation process that represents a new pattern of effects. This emphasis on something fresh and different can actually obscure the complexities inherent in the notion of creativity. Early trait theories of creativity saw it as being composed of a series of discrete steps taken by individuals and later cognitive theorist perceive creativity to be about the ability of individuals to handle contradiction and paradox. The latter is reinforced by sociological theories of creativity, which stress the role of context and social interaction (Bilton and Cummings, 2010). Creativity and its outcomes can thus be seen as being a multifaceted, a sometimes ephemeral phenomenon to those experiencing it. In the following discussion, although students do not attempt to define it they seem to recognise that creativity is about doing something new, different and value adding. Creativity came to the fore in the focus groups as a discussion point, because it was central to MRC project. To perform effectively, students had to show ideally, an abundance of creativity in terms of coming up with innovative ideas for their client companies. The MRC project does try to ensure that student's recognise the importance of creativity, encouraging them to work pro-actively and take opportunities when they arise. That this can create risks for students is acknowledged by one respondent:

It's not just theory, in the project there will not be much margin for error, the company might lose some money if we mess up so we will have to be very thorough [..]

This argument about risk has of course to be put in context. Given their limited level of exposure to the business world, potentially any activity the students undertake for the MRC firm could be seen as being risky, with the potential to lose money. For example, one of the organisations involved in the MRC project makes local soaps. So, making a suggestion to them for a new fragrance or colour, based on the student market research findings, might be viewed as a risk, even though only a very small, low-cost

investment is being made in the new product. The firms involved quite probably view the idea of what constitutes a risk differently to that of students. But for the latter, it is a useful learning experience in terms of recognising that marketing is more often than not, about making difficult and occasionally risky decisions.

In the focus groups interviews, students tended to be generally critical of their marketing degree for failing to develop creativity effectively. One respondent pointed out that:

Even with the module where we have had to come up with some creative ideas, market your own product we had this good idea, this whole new approach, but we still had to mainly think about the product in relation to existing marketing models, the emphasis was on the latter which was really restrictive and then we could not do any original marketing research, it was all second hand data, so it was not that useful in the end. We have not had enough creative things to do on the course.

A second respondent took up this theme:

There is a lack of chances to be creative, we are told to come up with our own ideas, but we are not given enough freedom. In the work there are so many models coming at you every week and we are told to refer back to this model or that model, its gets overwhelming.

Students in this study clearly recognise the importance of being creative in the workplace, but interestingly, few of the studies on marketing skills generally identify it as being an important attribute that employees need to possess for working. Gray *et al.* (2007) in a wide ranging of study of marketing skills, comprised of mainly educators and employers, identified that between 1983 and 2006, of 19 separate studies, only three show creativity as being an important skill possession. As a consequence, they do not include it in their final list of essential skills required by marketers. Conversely, the work of Taylor (2003), whilst showing that employers do rank creativity highly, fails to adequately illustrate how educators can incorporate this skill into course learning structures. For McCole (2004, p. 535) however, marketing now and in the future, will be characterised by “ingenuity creativity and innovativeness”, suggesting that educators must give it adequate attention. McCole argues that marketing employees have to be creative by tapping into diverse consumer emotions and desires for experiences that the traditional models of administrative marketing fails to reveal. If unique experiences are to be delivered to consumers, then it is up to marketing employees to be at the forefront of such an undertaking. It is revealing that the John Lewis Partnership, one of the UKs leading retail operations, lists amongst the principles it expects all employees to be able to exhibit is that of enterprise, or in other words, all employees are expected to be creative and innovative in work place roles (John Lewis Partnership, 2010).

This notion of creativity as an important and emerging skill for marketing employees to possess resonates clearly in the recent attention being paid to this area by those writing about entrepreneurial marketing. Morris *et al.* (2002) believe that rather than teaching marketing as a set of discrete principles, more attention needs to be focussed on entrepreneurial skill development. Topics should be pursued such as opportunity identification, risk assessment and the management of cross-functional innovation. It is further argued that students should be encouraged to develop their own unique business models, rather than relying on established varieties. Interestingly, Fillis (2004) points out that in the first edition of Kotler’s highly influential book on marketing management, written in 1967, there was a whole chapter devoted to

creativity which has since disappeared. Fillis goes on to point out that creativity can be about being prepared to experiment, rather than thinking in a linear fashion as administrative marketing encourages. For Fillis (2002, 2004), creativity is about risk taking and independent thinking. Pointedly, these are necessary skills and ones urgently required by the employees of large organisations as well as small (Miles and Darroch, 2006).

Overall student impressions

In summary here, the value in overall terms of undertaking the MRC course and of doing activities like this was rated very highly by most students, when they were asked to produce an answer evaluating the module. The following responses, extracted from the final open-ended questionnaire are fairly typical. One respondent commented that:

I think this project is a very good preparation for employment in order to combine theory with practice, it can also be mentioned on the CV.

Another respondent said they would have liked:

More work like this, it has been a very good experience and an excellent module for final level students [...]

Additionally, the MRC course was seen as being very beneficial [...]. "Because it gives students a chance to take a problem of a company and try to solve it."

This problem-centred learning is important as it takes place not within a simulated case study approach, but in the context of real organisational activity. Finally, for one student, perhaps showing maturity beyond their years, the MRC project was good to do [...] "Because yes, there is no better education than real life [...]"

Experience, skills acquisition and the inadequacy of marketing's administrative framework

For the students on the MRC project, what was important for them was that it helped in the acquisition of a range of general skills required in the workplace, within a marketing context. Recurrent themes in terms of skill development mentioned by students were team working, interaction in the workplace, communication and creativity. These, with the exception of creativity, are generally identified as being among the most important skills needed by organisations employing marketers (Dacko, 2006; Martin and Chapman, 2006; Gray *et al.*, 2007). Students, in their responses, placed a great deal of emphasis on the benefits of real-work experience time and time again. This is despite the fact that students will routinely be faced during their degree course at Lincoln, with assessments that demand they utilise work-based skills. These include group presentations and investigative type projects involving negotiations and team working with their peers. What the findings suggest is that the MRC project successfully builds on these and other nascent skill sets. The important reference point of experience mentioned by students informs the development of the MRC module. As well as being linked to a social theory of learning (Wenger, 1998), the MRC project can be seen to be partly inspired by a constructivist approach to education, with experience at its centre (Papert, 1980). The essence of constructivism is that the individual is the active creator of their own knowledge. The constructivist perspective suggests that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through

various types of experiences and then reflect on those experiences. In the context of the MRC project, students experienced things like group working and negotiation which they then reflected on and built into their own knowledge base. Additionally, in constructivism, when an individual encounters something new, it has to be reconciled with previous ideas and experience and as a consequence, a change may occur in what is believed (Wenger, 1998). For the students on the MRC project, as was illustrated, some views changed on marketing as a result of their encounters with the practitioner world.

It is argued that behind the problems of marketing pedagogy, where question marks hang over student's skill levels, is the administrative model of marketing that dominates business schools in universities. The research of Hills *et al.* (2008) found that successful entrepreneurs held cognitive models of marketing that did not come anywhere near those offered in leading textbooks and that practitioners were found to be successful in unconventional ways. To be effective in the workplace, students will need to learn these processes, or ones like them. The problem for practice learning is that the prescriptions of orthodox marketing come in the form of a decision-making apparatus that assumes predictable individuals and an unproblematic process. Both of these assumptions fall well short of the complexities of actual practice. The model of marketing education that has the ascendancy is one of the bureaucratic varieties, often represented as a series of linear steps that companies and learners must pass through before success, or true knowledge, can be obtained. For example, marketing audits are followed by marketing strategy and then by marketing tactics. For Brownlie and Saren (1997), this type of marketing discourse is one-dimensional, lacking the realities and nuances of the business world, yet it is the one students' are told reflects practice. Brown (2008) notes that many successful marketers have never studied the subject formally, suggesting that the types of skills discussed in this paper are central to working life and hence more relevant. Further, as Hackley (2009) has recently argued, marketing strategy can be seen as being chaotic and intuitive, yet still successful, not necessarily composed of the explicit planning stages found in the administrative model of marketing. This suggests that it is experience that will teach students the importance of intuition, not traditional marketing theory. It can be posited then, that a reliance on only formal descriptions of marketing will make it unlikely that would be marketers will be able to acquire the implicit practices required to be effective in the workplace.

Reflected to some extent in the MRC course, Lave and Wenger (1991) have developed an analytical concept known as legitimate peripheral participation, which assists in the process of gaining knowledge in the work situation. This concept derives from an interpretation of learning in the apprenticeship situation. Brownlie and Spender (1995), also 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. As a consequence, in order that newcomers to the wider marketing community can accumulate knowledge and acquire skills, they must participate in the social and cultural practices of that same community. This suggests a strong role for modules like the MRC project in marketing education. Marketing knowledge and skills cannot be acquired effectively in the abstract and, as Martin and Chapman's (2006) evidence points out, it is unfortunately true that many marketing graduates have little understanding of how the discipline relates to the small- and medium-sized business sector. Without some

experience gained in the workplace by students, actual practice cannot be well understood. In the “Findings” section above, course members on the MRC project seem to readily recognise this fact. Importantly, they are given the opportunity to explore marketing in an applied situation and to use a range of skills in context. This paper questions therefore, the simple transfer view of knowledge, which dominates much learning about marketing.

Conclusion: action learning and the education of tomorrow’s marketers

It is argued that the structure and delivery of the MRC project represents a way to initiate and develop the skills required for the marketers of tomorrow. As a consequence, the above findings point strongly in the direction of adopting a style of learning about marketing that is rooted in practice. It is important to recognise however, that courses of this nature can be expensive. This is in terms of staffing and resources, yet it is an important aspect of learning which should be made more widely available, if the positive reports of the students here are taken into account. In order to ensure that other marketing advertising and public relations students can do the MRC project in their third year, an employer engagement officer in the Lincoln Business School with an assistant has been appointed. The role is to source more organisations that require consultancy type projects. In this way, with tutors in place to deliver the module, all students who enter the final year of the degree will not be short of an organisation to work with. Clearly, without the support of local organisations the MRC project would not run and in this sense the employer engagement officer plays a vital role.

Although based on a small sample, the research results indicate here that what students see as being central to understanding practice differs somewhat from what the administrative marketing framework sees as important for learning. It is significant that the majority of respondents understand the importance of acquiring communicative, team and interpersonal skills. Students realise these skills will help them develop a form of practice knowledge that is more relevant to work, as opposed to the reliance on the model-laden marketing texts they are familiar with. It is questionable to assume that many of the models students examine are actually that useful anyway, as Piercy (1995) has pointed out. While it is acknowledged that the skills students see as important have been recognised by other research studies, the key issue here is how to ensure that these same skills are acquired effectively. Certainly, the Lincoln MRC module is not alone in basing its approach on action learning (McLoughlin, 2004). An additional interesting insight from the Lincoln study, a topic which has probably not received the attention it deserves, indicates that through socialisation and experience, tacit knowledge can be gained. A further previously neglected area, although its importance is recognised by students, is the skill of creativity. Both these areas are worthy of more research. In particular, it is recommended that work needs to be undertaken to examine analytically the role of the tacit in marketing and its relationship to experience and skill development.

The main recommendation here however is that action learning becomes central to learning about marketing, an argument supported by Cunningham (1999). Action learning emphasises learning by doing (Kable, 1989), where participants work on a defined topic which is significant to the individuals themselves, resulting in effective action. This is the approach adopted on the MRC project, where students get to choose

the company they want to work with. Students learn from experience, share that experience with others and have those colleagues criticise and advise. This is termed as the “comrades in adversity” approach to learning and is a basis for assessing how to improve one’s own individual skills (Margerison, 1988, p. 43). On the MRC project, the action-learning set is the student group working for the client. Learning sets usually have a facilitator, in the case of the MRC project it is the tutor who acts as a guide. Advice is given to students, but a conscious attempt is made not to lay down any prescriptive guidelines; the learning set must find its own way through the marketing problem of the company they are working for. In terms of the actual learning cycle, the latter 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. On the MRC module, as noted previously, students after doing the project, then write a reflective log on their experiences. In a programme based on this perspective, innovative approaches could also be tried, for example to examine the working metaphors used in the company of the project, thus providing important insights into the nature of marketing problems and their possible resolution (Fillis and Rentschler, 2008).

In terms of developing more of a pluralistic approach to marketing as advocated by Hackley (2001), all the new insights gained from the MRC action learning sets could be compared, in a variety of ways, with other new or established theoretical and practical approaches which form part of the marketing knowledge base. This means that the action learning process enables a local and socially constructed knowledge of marketing to be worked on and debated, reflecting to some extent the concerns of Martin and Chapman (2006). More generally, what the emphasis of the MRC project mirrors, is a move in thinking across parts of the university sector. The focus is to involve students more in activities that are inquiry and problem based, where original investigations take place, rather than learning only through traditional pedagogy. Students are encouraged in this perspective to learn by engagement in a real research project, which can then lead to the generation of new knowledge and its dissemination through appropriate sources (Neary, 2009). The whole approach of the MRC project actually represents a major departure from much mainstream marketing teaching and as can be seen, is highly valued by Lincoln students, where they see it developing their skills for working life. The next stage in the research could involve identifying employer responses to the project, perhaps picking up on particular skills, like creativity. Finally here, the emphasis on action learning does not mean that all other approaches to marketing education be abruptly dismissed, or that an overly instrumental approach dominates the curriculum, a point raised in the introduction. There should be room to not only engage with functional criticisms of how marketing actually works in practice, but reflective learning should also take place regarding marketing ethics and additionally, the disciplines intellectual foundations. In regard to the latter, there is a need to show that it is capable of transcending the academic shallowness often subscribed to it. Challenges exist in this area, where marketing education might seem to be possessed of a narrow, functional knowledge base. The important point here however, is that marketing educators engage with the debate raised above regarding action learning, the value of projects like the MRC and think about the consequences for students and their later working lives. We owe this at least, to the marketers of tomorrow.

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Further reading

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