

# Innovation In Assessment: Injecting Reality Into Business Education

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## ABSTRACT

*Relevance and reality are often thought to be absent from business education. This paper shows how innovation can be linked to reality in a very simple fashion. It takes us away from the notion that innovation has to be technology based. While much is indeed written in this area of innovation utilising new technologies, this paper takes us back to basics. It documents the introduction and implementation of an innovative assessment task that has no technical element. The assessment entitled International Marketing in Action brings reality and relevance to students' learning experience by exposing them to everyday happenings and thereby immersing them in the learning experience.*

## INTRODUCTION

Relevance and reality are often considered, especially by students, to be absent from business education. Many authors have acknowledged this fact and indeed many educators have risen to the challenge by providing hands on learning and live cases in an attempt to integrate realism back into learning (Elam and Spotts 2004; Kennedy, Lawton and Walker 2001; Razzouk, Seitz and Rizkallah 2003; Tabor 2005; Young 2002; Zych 1997). However it is not always feasible to provide hands on learning or live cases especially in marketing education. The problem many of us are faced with is growing class sizes where the opportunity for providing real life experience is limited. Nevertheless students crave the reality aspect of education and like to see how what they are learning in the classroom has relevance in a real world situation. With this problem in mind the author developed an innovative approach to assessment, to not only highlight the relevance of the subject material but also to improve learning outcomes.

To begin this paper outlines the context in which this innovation "International Marketing in Action" was designed and implemented. It provides a rationale for introducing this assessment task based on an investigation of the existing literature on assessment and the need as identified by the author. Utilizing the available theory the innovative assessment task is introduced, outlining exactly how the approach was developed and implemented. In conclusion the students' comments and feedback are provided to showcase the success of the approach.

## INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT

The rationale behind introducing a new assessment task was two-fold, firstly based on student feedback was the need to show relevancy but secondly having taught international marketing for many years was the notion that often the students think it is only about culture. There is no denying that culture plays a major role in international marketing but there are many other key concepts which students are exposed to and often fail to comprehend the relevance of.

The challenge in developing this assessment task was to introduce reality into the subject and simultaneously assess the learning outcomes of the subject effectively, while exposing them to as many concepts as possible. Traditional assessment approaches are many and varied but include such tasks as multiple choice tests, short answer tests, essay tests, cases, projects, presentations and simulations (Hartley et al 2000). Most subjects in business and marketing education combine various approaches to reach a balance in learning outcomes. Our key aim in education is that the students gain knowledge, but this must go beyond ensuring comprehension, application and synthesis,

indeed there has been much discussion in the literature on reality based learning and how that can encourage relevancy in teaching and assessment (Smith and Van Doren 2004). There is also a belief that this must be taken one step further and that the assessment approach should maximize the learning outcomes (Sutton-Brady and Stegemann 2005).

To maximize the learning outcomes in the subject International and Global Marketing, a postgraduate level subject taught at a leading Australian University, a combination of assessment tasks was used. These tasks were designed in line with Bloom's six levels of the taxonomy Level 1, knowledge- remembering facts, terms principles, definitions, etc.; Level 2, comprehension- translating ideas from one context to another, interpreting, extrapolating etc.; Level 3, application – using rules and principles in certain situations; Level 4, analysis – breaking down and making clear the nature of components and the relationship between them; Level 5, synthesis – arranging and assembling the elements to develop a new statement, plan or conclusion; Level 6, evaluation- assessing the value of methods or approaches regarding internal accuracy and consistency (Bloom 1956).

Although students in previous semesters had rated the subject highly the overriding issue that continually appeared in student evaluations of the subject was the need to see the relevance of the subject content in real world situations. The author attempted to introduce a more case study based approach yet the comments persisted. It was therefore decided that something new was needed to address the issue.

Previous authors have shown that students positively react to assessment adaptations (Nelson 2000), the author was therefore confident that a new assessment task could be designed and successfully implemented.

## **INTERNATIONAL MARKETING IN ACTION**

As previously pointed out reality based learning as traditionally discussed is not always feasible in many schools. Nowadays the expectation is that innovation has a technological base. Much of the recent work published on innovation in education has tended to highlight the use of technology (Clarke, Flaherty and Mottner 2001; Dacko 2001; Hadwin, Winne and Nesbit 2005; Sutton-Brady and Stegemann 2005; Ueltschy 2001). While there is no denying that there is an important role for technology in the classroom and in assessment but it often becomes a resource issue for many universities. Additionally expecting all students to be technically proficient to carry out a marketing assessment may be seen as disadvantaging some, in other words they may not be starting on a level playing field. With this in mind, this innovative assessment task was developed to maximize the relevance of the subject content while remaining mindful of resource and equity issues.

The task, International Marketing in Action (IMIA), requires the students to produce a portfolio of 10 items over the 13 weeks of semester. A brief descriptor of the assessment task is below.

*Each student must individually prepare a portfolio of international marketing examples. It is expected that the portfolio should contain 10 items highlighting some area of international marketing. These items can be taken from newspapers, magazines, journals or websites and must be no more than 12 months old. An example of an appropriate item will be posted on Blackboard. Students will be assessed on the suitability of the item, the item's relevance and importance to International Marketing, the standard of their short comments and the breadth of topics covered. The comments on each portfolio item should be no more than one paragraph or 150-200 words.*

The assessment task was weighted at 20% of their total grade for the subject. In the first week of semester students were shown various examples of appropriate articles which would make good portfolio items. It was then up to them in the following weeks to keep abreast of happenings in the world to find relevant and interesting news items for their portfolios. The nature of the assessment meant that they were suddenly immersed in real world happenings and could on a day-to-day basis see the relevance of what they were learning in class. This immersion of students in the learning experience has been shown by other authors to allow the students to gain a greater understanding of the subject matter while having a more enjoyable learning experience (Pearce and Sutton-Brady 2003). The assessment task was innovative and challenging but by no means overly taxing. It was clearly a task that all students could easily complete and additionally a task that allowed many to shine.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to assess the implementation of the innovative approach student evaluations at the end of the semester were analyzed for both positive and negative feedback. This approach was considered relevant since it was in previous semesters' evaluations that comments were found on the relevance of the unit. It was therefore felt that any comments on the new task might also pop up here. While the feedback was overwhelmingly in support of the assessment as can be seen from comments below, there was some negative feedback, which allowed the process to be refined. Students' comments included:

- "The portfolio was awesome, I even enjoyed doing it!"
- "Very actively engaged in this subject, mainly because of the portfolio, I had to be Thinking about it the whole time."
- "the IMIA was really practical, even found myself checking exchange rates never though about that as something I would do for international marketing"
- "having to collect a variety of items made me look at all the topics in the subject, I think I got a broader understanding of International Marketing because of this"
- "portfolio was perfect for demonstrating what I learned throughout the course"
- "The portfolio should be worth more and we should collect more items, loved it"
- "would like more examples at the beginning of semester to show me what I can use in the portfolio"

As a result of the evaluations the first thing that was addressed in following semester was that students were given a lot more examples in the first week of suitable portfolio items. This additional briefing allowed them to become more comfortable with the assessment and also increased their confidence in approaching it.

The most satisfying thing to come from this innovative assessment was the fact that they now felt actively involved in learning. Much research has shown that this move away from passive learning is the key to success in marketing education (Granitz 2001; Pearce and Sutton-Brady 2003). Furthermore Elam and Spotts (2004) highlight the need in marketing curriculum for creating a more memorable experience and facilitating more effective and durable learning. The innovative assessment documented here has not only provided that memorable experience but based on student comments immersed them in the learning process.

The relevance problem, which was the foremost reason for developing the task was overcome, students referred to the fact that it was practical and also allowed them to demonstrate what they had learned. From an assessment point of view while it meant they were constantly thinking about the topics this in a sense meant that they were continually aware of international marketing's relevance in their day-to-day lives.

As previously pointed out one of the authors underlying reasons for introducing it was to show the students that there was more to international marketing than culture. From the comments and also from the items submitted in the portfolio this was achieved. As one student said "the IMIA was really practical, even found myself checking exchange rates never though about that as something I would do for international marketing". This success was helped in part by the fact that one of the assessment criteria was breadth of topics. So while it is often easy to find articles and examples on mistakes in international marketing as a result of culture they were forced to think beyond those. This expansion of their knowledge and understanding of international marketing provides them with a more balanced education and learning experience.

From an instructor's viewpoint the assessment criteria make it easy to grade especially since there tends to be great variability in the quality of the comments showing the relevance of the portfolio item to international marketing. Some students also tend to have favorite topics, which tends to lose them marks on breadth or variety of topics covered. This issue is one that is pointed out at the beginning of semester but as with a lot of advice, the warning falls on deaf ears.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall this paper has showcased a new and innovative approach to assessment. It has shown how it was successfully implemented and how the approach was positively received by students. It has also shown that innovation does not nowadays always have to be technology based to be successful. This simple innovation is easy for any academic to introduce, does not tie up university resources and most importantly provides positive learning outcomes for the students. This simple non-technical innovation also highlights that we can go back to basics, while achieving improved learning outcomes and heightened student enjoyment. The simplicity of the innovation means it can easily be adapted for other units in the business degree. Additionally it could be used at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels since the only real difference should lie in the quality of their commentary. It provides an opportunity to bring reality back to education on a number of levels and indeed across a broad range of subjects.

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