Marketing Theatre Education: Using Improvisation for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper describes an approach for teaching marketing skills to tertiary students through improvisational theatre experiences. These skills of communication, creativity, ambiguity-tolerance, team building and problem-solving have been identified by researchers to be crucial in the marketing field and often missing in marketing education. While some researchers have already established a link between marketing and theatre, this paper builds upon that literature to suggest an improvisational model that aligns marketing education and employers' expectations. This improvisational model was implemented in one graduate and one undergraduate marketing class and data was collected. A preliminary analysis of the data indicates that students see this model as an effective method for learning marketing skills.

Introduction: Aligning Marketing Education and Employers' Expectations

As with many disciplines, marketing education comfortably resided in the ivory tower with occasional forays into the real world via case studies, projects, and service-learning. Using Dewey's (1920) theory of experiential education, there is a need to shift marketing and business education away from the divided model of isolating facts provided in lectures from their usage in practise. This need to integrate facts and usage in marketing education is described in Chonko's (1993) critique of the quality of business school graduates, a majority of which are perceived as lacking communication, analytical thinking, and ambiguity-tolerating skills. It does appear that some within marketing education are responding to this challenge by changing their teaching approaches, as found in Smart et al.'s (1999) study, "… marketing faculty are lecturing less and working harder to develop class cultures within which students feel comfortable and compelled to take on more of the responsibility for their learning… Given rising employer expectations … the trend is irreversible" (p. 210).

In view of this and given the need to teach marketing in different and more effective ways, what are some approaches that can be implemented and researched? One approach recently introduced at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand builds upon existing literature that equates marketing to theatre. This approach, the Marketing Theatre Model, uses the connections of marketing and theatre and translates them into classroom practices through improvisation. To best understand the rationale behind this approach, it is useful to review the literature and explain how the connection of marketing and theatre has been established.

Theatrical Concepts in Business, Marketing and Marketing Education

Theatre and drama (see e.g. Neelands, 2006; O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1992; Schechner, 2003) and research on drama (O'Toole, 2006) in education have long been an area of interest for researchers and teachers. Theatre is defined as the audience's assembly for a dramatic performance (Dictionary.com, 2008) whereas drama is understood as "a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance" (Merriam-Webster, 2008). There is an existing body of knowledge in educational literature which links learning with theatre or drama (see Bolton, 1979; 1984; Dickinson et al. 2006;

Heathcote and Bolton, 1995; Jackson, 1980; Martin, Leberman and Neill, 2002; Robinson, 1980). Similarly, researchers and practitioners in business have adopted theatrical concepts and applied them to companies through professional development (e.g. Second City Communications, 2008; Out of the Blue, 2008; The Court Theatre, 2008; The Learning Theatre Organisation, 2008) and investigated the applications of theatrical models and concepts to organisations (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

In addition, researchers and business practitioners have identified that business is not always process-related following standard scripts (e.g. Goldstein, 2008). In order to prepare for those unscripted business activities, practitioners and scholars have been interested in the value of improvisation (Aylesworth, 2008) in a variety of contexts. Cunha et al. (1999, p. 302) define organisational improvisation as "conception of action as it unfolds, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources." It has been researched in areas of new product development (Moorman and Milner, 1998), organisational learning (Miner et al., 2001), organisational design and analysis (Weick, 1993; 1998) and organisational restructuring (Ciborra, 1996). Further, because improvisation is an integral part of theatre and jazz (see e.g. Johnston, 1993; Schechner, 2003), scholars have attempted to learn from these areas where it is the norm rather than the exception (Aylesworth, 2008; Cunha et al., 1999). Examples of the application of jazz improvisation can be found in research on service encounters (John et al., 2006), organisational creativity and innovation (Barrett, 1998; Bastien and Hostager, 1998), management (Mirvis, 1998), organisational strategy (Gold and Hirshfeld, 2005) and organisational environment (Chelariu et al., 2001). Knowledge of improvisational theatre has been used to better understand business innovation (Crossan, 1997), management (Crossan, 1998; Koppett, 2002), collaborative technology (McKnight and Bontis, 2002), and team performance (Vera and Crossan, 2005). A limited number of scholars (see e.g. Gibb, 2004, Huffaker and West, 2005; Moshavi, 2001) have explored the connections of those types of improvisation and business education. Although several marketing practitioners appear to use improvisation concepts (e.g. Goldstein, 2008), few marketing researchers (e.g. Grove et al., 2000; John et al., 2006; Moisio and Arnould, 2005; Stern, 1990) and educators (e.g. Aylesworth, 2008; Pearce, 2001; Pearce, 2004; Pearce, 2005; Pearce and Jackson, 2005; Pearce and Kamineni, 2004) have made use of theatrical elements.

The Rationale for the Connection of Marketing and Theatre

The work of Fisk et al. (2007) and their numerous and very closely related publications on the same topic (see Grove and Fisk, 1983; 1992; 1995; Grove, Fisk and Bitner, 1992; Grove, Fisk and Dorsch, 1998; Grove, Fisk and John, 2000) which connect services marketing and theatre can be regarded as key contributions to the field. Fisk et al.'s (2007) work suggests that theatre is a metaphor to be used in a service setting. Their model is based on services literature and the extension of the 4P's - Product, Price, Place and Promotion - of the Marketing-Mix (see McCarthy, 1960; Kotler and Keller, 2009) for services by adding three more P's: Physical facilities, People or Participants and Processes (Bitner, 1991; Booms and Bitner, 1981; Botten and McManus, 1999; Magrath, 1986; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004; Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2006). Interestingly enough, Fisk et al. (2007) link only those three additional P's to a theatre setting.

Type	Company-oriented Marketing Framework	Customer-oriented Framework	Theatrical Framework
Strat.	Marketing Strategy	Customer Concept	Drama
Marketing-Mix	Product / Service	Customer Solution	Tangibles or Intangibles
	Price	Cost	Value of (In-)Tangibles
	Promotion	Communication	Language
	Place	Convenience	Location of Setting
Extended Marketing-Mix	Physical facilities	Connectors	Setting (Backstage and Frontstage)
	Participants (Staff)	Customer	Actors and Audience
	Process	Conveying Experience	Scripted or unscripted Performance

Figure 1:   Matching Marketing-related and Theatre-related Frameworks

Figure 1, therefore, has been created as a framework by building on past research including all 7P's. It is suggested here that processes, participants and physical facilities play a role in any marketing context and therefore can be applied to both product and service firms. In addition, by adapting Lauterborn's (1990) notion that the Marketing Mix has to be regarded from a customer's point of view, the 4P's have been matched by the 4C's. Consequently, in Figure 1, column 2, the extended Marketing-Mix has to be re-modelled creating the 8C's. The marketing strategy including the 7P's (8C's) can now be paralleled with a theatre performance as shown in column 3 of Figure 1.

The Marketing Theatre Model

If every marketing performance with customers is a theatrical performance, it follows that marketers can be trained within the context of theatrical performances. This is illustrated in the match of marketing and theatre in Figure 1 (see also Booms and Bitner, 1981; Fisk et al., 2007; Kotler and Keller, 2009; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Equating this match of marketing and theatre, leads to the following comparisons:

The location of the setting is the company's headquarters, the frontstage is the branch / outlet the customer (audience) goes to and meets with employees (actors) to purchase a product or service ((in-)tangibles). The back office is the company's backstage and the home is the consumer's backstage. In this model, frontstage and backstage both form the setting. During the performance (process of conveying the customer experience), employee and customer exchange products or services (customer solution / (in-)tangibles) that have a certain value (cost) by using some form of communication (language). In order to perform properly, the company has to decide on a marketing strategy or customer concept (drama) to present its offerings. These two closely connected spheres of marketing and theatre are depicted in Figure 2 as the Marketing Theatre Model.

Using this model, if marketers and marketing employees seek to enhance their performance in front of the company's external and internal customers, training should be provided at an early stage, starting in universities. Proper marketing training and education, therefore, can help prepare students how to act and react in front of colleagues and customers.
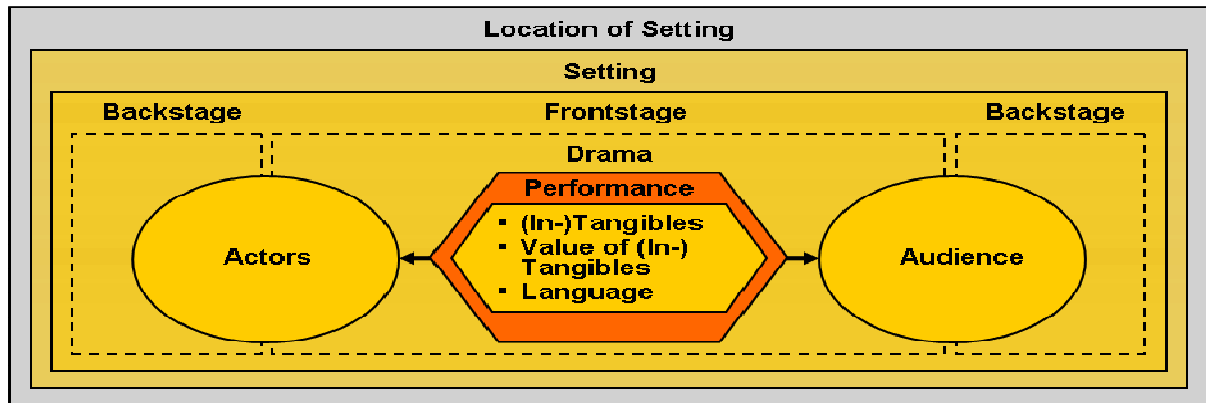
Figure 2:　　　The Marketing Theatre Model

A potentially powerful way to learn these marketing skills is through improvisational theatre which is a highly dynamic and unscripted experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and shares many similarities to the marketing environment. This allows students the opportunity to learn how to (re-)act in marketing situations where there is little time to think and how to be adaptable if they have to deviate from scripted processes or usual procedures. Thus, by using improvisation, the Marketing Theatre Model can create that link between the 'acting requirements' of the real world and the teaching of marketing skills.

Introducing the Marketing Theatre Model in Teaching and Learning

Based on this Marketing Theatre Model, a teaching approach was created at the University of Canterbury to provide tertiary students with an opportunity to apply both marketing concepts and skills through improvisation within the classroom setting. In order for students to best achieve Chonko's (1993) missing learning outcomes, the theatrical experience was brought to them. Through collaboration with two actor-facilitators from a local theatre company, two improvisational sessions were planned around research-based marketing skills. The actor-facilitators then led students through a sequence of acting experiences which focused on communication, ambiguity-tolerating, spontaneity, team-building skills and creativity.

To assess the effectiveness of this approach, which meets both Dewey's (1920) and Smart et al.'s (1999) suggestions, data was collected with a "naturalistic inquiry" methodology (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) that included: observations during the improvisation sessions, observations during their subsequent class sessions, students' reflections before and after the sessions, and students' definitions of marketing and marketing skills before and after the sessions. Although the collected data is still being analysed for the relationship between students' perceptions of skills acquired during the sessions and the instructor's intended learning outcomes, some preliminary observations have been made about the effectiveness of this approach.

Findings

Among the preliminary findings from the data, it appears that the improvisation sessions affected students' communication and bonding behaviours. While it was apparent during the improvisation sessions that students were building a deeper sense of rapport with each other, their increased confidence to communicate with each other and the instructor, transferred into

their subsequent class sessions activities through discussions and presentations. These improvisation experiences also appeared to directly translate into marketing education with one student stating: "… the ability to improvise and think outside the square is important to most aspects of business including Marketing."

Another preliminary finding from the data involves the timing of the improvisation sessions. It appears to be crucial to have these sessions at the beginning of a semester when the students' work load is less so that they are relaxed enough to enthusiastically participate in the sessions. In addition, for the improvisation sessions and any learning to be deemed as relevant to content-based lectures, they needed to be integrated into class time so as not to be perceived as an extra curricular workload. Similarly, it is clear that students expected a clear lesson plan with anticipated learning outcomes for the session. These are important logistical findings to be considered for future implementations. As marketing students may view improvisation classes with hesitation and question their relevance to marketing content, it is critical to address these concerns before the sessions so they can be open to the learning possibilities.

Conclusion

As is to be expected with the first iteration of a new teaching and learning approach, the preliminary findings suggest that there are several areas to improve for future implementations. However, perhaps the most important implication for marketing educators is to risk innovation in the classroom in search of more productive outcomes for students and employers. Hopefully, approaches like the Marketing Theatre Model will help lead the way in making factual learning more experiential. A longitudinal analysis is necessary to shed further light on the effectiveness of the teaching approach.

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