EXPLORING MARKETING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS USING THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE (CIT) APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogical innovations have significant implications for marketing educators' effectiveness. Consistent with the notion that customer orientation makes innovation efforts more effective, an understanding of student (customer) perceptions of pedagogical innovations could greatly facilitate better development and dissemination of pedagogical innovations. Therefore, this paper employs the critical incident technique (CIT) approach and explores marketing students' perceptions of both pedagogical innovations and innovative instructors. Implications of the study for marketing pedagogy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

To improve their teaching effectiveness, marketing educators often attempt to develop and employ innovative pedagogical techniques in their classrooms. As Albers-Miller, Straughan, and Prenshaw (2001, p. 249) observe, "the call for innovation has become a recurring theme" that resonates among faculty across business schools. Innovative techniques, for example, those that promote active or experiential learning, have been demonstrated to have a significant impact on student learning and performance outcomes. Subsequently, there is an increased interest in developing, sharing, and practicing effective pedagogical innovations. In fact, Marketing Education Review has an annual special issue dedicated to pedagogical innovations. However, what are pedagogical innovations? Adapting Phillips' (1981) definition of education innovation, we consider pedagogical innovations as classroom practices and activities that are (a) different from standard instructional methods, (b) specifically designed for a particular course or topic (c) worthy of emulation, and/or (d) yet to be adopted by a significant number of other instructors.

What helps marketing educators in their innovation efforts? Among other things, this article contends that customer (student) orientation can have positive impact on pedagogical innovation. Drawing on the innovation research stream in the marketing literature, this article rests on the foundational premise that customer orientation can help in the innovation efforts of marketing educators. Furthermore, as with any other innovation, the effectiveness of innovative pedagogical techniques needs

to be monitored closely. Simply stated, a customer orientation refers to the identification, analysis, understanding, and responsiveness to customer needs (Gatignon and Xuereb 1997; Narver and Slater 1990). Accordingly, a customer oriented approach toward developing, implementing, and modifying pedagogical innovations would involve studying and understanding students' perceptions of such techniques.

The marketing literature is replete with studies highlighting the importance of customer oriented approaches in business-to-business, business-to-consumer, and consumer-to-consumer settings. Correspondingly, in the context of pedagogy, Desai, Damewood, and Jones (2001) empirically show that customer oriented approaches by professional educators can lead to improved ways of teaching. Likewise, Smart, Kelly, and Conant (1999) propose that marketing educators must listen and respond to their students. Unfortunately, while some studies have explored marketing instructors' perceptions of pedagogical innovations (e.g., Conant, Smart, and Kelley 1988; Smart, Kelley, and Conant 2003), barring Clarke, Flaherty, and Mottner (2001), marketing students' perceptions of pedagogical innovations remain relatively unexplored. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap and examine marketing students' perceptions regarding pedagogical innovations and innovative instructors. Specifically, we explore the following issues:

- ♦ When do marketing students perceive certain pedagogical techniques as innovative?
- How do marketing students expect to benefit from pedagogical innovations?

- What distinct characteristics do marketing students observe in innovative instructors?
- Where do marketing students see the need for more innovations?

To achieve these goals, we employ the critical incident technique (henceforth, CIT), which is a valid and reliable research technique that yields rich qualitative data (Houston and Bettencourt 1999). While the CIT is quite popular in service research, it has not been applied extensively in the marketing education literature.

The paper is organized as follows. First, borrowing from past studies on customer orientation in marketing pedagogy, we discuss the theoretical rationale for this study. Second, after a brief review and description of the CIT approach, we discuss the implementation of our study. Finally, we discuss the study's key findings and offer directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

An extension of the marketing concept (Drucker 1954), customer orientation has become firmly ensconced within the marketing literature. While numerous studies have cited the beneficial effects of customer orientation on business performance (e.g., Deshpande, Farley, and Webster 1993; Lukas and Ferrell 2000; Narver and Slater 1990), others have argued that customer oriented approaches are detrimental to the organization (e.g., Gatignon and Xuereb 1997; Voss and Voss 2000). Likewise, in the context of marketing pedagogy, research on customer orientation has produced mixed viewpoints. Focusing on the merits of a customer orientation, Clarke, Flaherty, and Mottner (2001) note that the adoption of "a bottom-up view" or studying student perceptions can enable marketing educators to improve their curriculum and teaching methods more effectively. Likewise, Lea, Stephenson, and Troy (2003) noted the beneficial effects of student-centered approaches and called for greater consultation with students.

On the other hand, as Obermiller, Fleenor, and Raven (2005) note, critics have described customer oriented pedagogical approaches as tantamount to letting the inmates run the asylum. Similarly, Franz (1998) states that customer oriented faculty may be reduced to entertainers, engaged in roles of delighting students instead of teaching them. Others have debated whether students should be treated as "customers" and have questioned the appropriateness of a customer orientation in pedagogy (see Franz 1998; Obermiller, Fleenor, and Raven 2005).

In this paper, following Hunt (2002), we adopt a more moderate posture pertaining to customer oriented pedagogy. As Hunt (2002, p. 60, italics added) notes:

[W]e owe our students an *obligation to listen*. That is, our clients' expressed needs must serve as input for marketing programs and pedagogy. Howev-

er, we also have a complementary duty: we must *resist the temptation to obey*. As professionals, just as physicians cannot allow patients to prescribe their own medicine, we—mindful of our fiduciary relationship with students – must also rely on our best professional judgment as to appropriate marketing programs, courses, and pedagogy.

That is, while the collection of information pertaining to student needs is both necessary and harmless, faculty response to such information must be based on careful analyses. Indeed, as students may not be the best judges of what is appropriate for attaining their learning goals, blindly acting upon expressed needs is futile. Further, it is also possible that students may not be able to articulate their learning needs. Therefore, the tasks of determining students' learning needs and developing suitable teaching practices lie with the educator. Such an orientation is equally appropriate while gauging student perceptions of pedagogical innovations.

However, as stated earlier, very little is known on (a) how marketing students perceive such innovations and innovators and (b) specific pedagogical areas and marketing courses in which students perceive the need for more innovations. By employing the CIT approach, the current study provides initial insights into student perceptions of pedagogical innovations.

METHOD

The CIT was pioneered by Flanagan (1954) more than fifty years ago to identify traits that enabled World War II pilot candidates to perform more effectively in combat situations. Over the years, it has found widespread acceptance in the general marketing and service literatures (see Gremler 2004 for a comprehensive review). Also, the usage of CIT has precedence in educational research as well (e.g., Houston and Bettencourt 1999; Sautter and Hanna 1995). Chell (1998, p. 56) describes the CIT as follows:

The critical incident technique is a qualitative interview procedure which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues) identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements.

An incident is an observable human activity, which is complete enough to make inferences (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). Further, a "critical" incident is one that makes a positive or negative contribution (Gremler 2004; Grove and Fisk 1997).

As Gremler (2004) states, the advantages of CIT include the following: (a) it elicits information from the

respondent's perspective on events perceived as critical by the respondent, (b) the method's inductive nature is especially useful when the topic studied is under-researched, (c) it can provide an accurate and in-depth description of events, and (d) it can yield rich data as respondents provide information on firsthand experiences that have left strong impressions on them. Therefore, we consider the CIT as an attractive method in the current context because (a) it is goal directed, (b) is not limited to a set of variables, and (c) elicits responses pertaining to actual events from respondents' memory (Gremler 2004; Sautter and Hanna 1995).

Students in two upper division marketing courses at a large southwestern university were requested to participate in the study. Students were offered extra credit for completing the questionnaire and were requested to provide detailed responses wherever required. In all, eighty students agreed to participate in the study. Consistent with prior CIT studies, we followed the phases recommended by past researchers (Gremler 2004; Sautter and Hanna 1995). The five steps implemented in the current study are briefly described below.

Phase 1 – Specify the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify marketing students' perceptions of innovative pedagogical approaches and instructors. Knowledge of attitudes toward and the desirability of both pedagogical innovations and innovators can help in the development and dissemination of more effective pedagogical approaches.

Phase 2 – Define a Critical Incident and Develop Data Collection Instrument

Following the definition provided earlier, an incident in this study refers to a pedagogical technique or approach that is perceived as innovative by the respondents. Correspondingly, "critical" incidents are characteristics of those innovative techniques that impact student behavior positively or negatively. As recommended by Gremler (2004), a detailed data collection instrument was designed with appropriate story triggering questions and was pretested. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter, which outlined general instructions, the nature of the study, and a statement regarding confidentiality of responses. Respondents were provided time in class to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire began with the statement:

Some instructors attempt to facilitate the learning process by using innovative teaching methods. These methods may be utilized in various classroom activities, including lectures and other interactive activities. However, very little is known on how students perceive such innovative methods and the

instructors who employ them. This questionnaire is being administered to explore students' perceptions of innovative teaching methods employed by instructors

Subsequently, the questionnaire itself was organized into several parts. The first part comprised of open-ended questions that addressed students' perceptions of pedagogical innovations. Specifically, students were asked to report *when* and *why* they perceived a pedagogical technique as innovative. The second part consisted of openended questions that probed students' perceptions of innovative instructors. These were followed by questions that elicited responses with regard to specific pedagogical areas where students saw the need for more innovative methods. Finally, students were asked to list marketing courses where they thought innovative methods are more important.

Phase 3 – Collect Data: Collecting Written Responses Is Common in the CIT Method.

This facilitates analysis, coding, and subsequently, the creation of categories. As part of the screening process, respondents were asked to briefly describe a pedagogical innovation they had observed. This information was helpful in identifying critical incidents and was not actually used in the categorization process.

Phase 4 – Data Analysis: Data Analysis Was Performed Through Content Analysis of Critical Incidents

All responses were read carefully and recurring themes were identified. Subsequently, classification schemes were identified to categorize responses. An independent judgment process was used to sort responses (Sautter and Hanna 1995). Data categorization was performed by one of the researchers, followed by a scrambling of the data and reclassification by another researcher. Intracoder and intercoder agreement rates were assessed to be satisfactory.

Phase 5 – Report Results

To obtain rich and objective information, the results of CIT approaches are presented as the categories or subcategories that emerge from the classification process (Houston and Bettencourt 1999). As Sautter and Hanna (1995, p. 35) propose, "Results should be summarized using self-explanatory titles for the category headings and subheading. The report should include examples of critical incidents that typify the specific category." Accordingly, the results of our study are presented in the following section.

RESULTS

We present our results in the same order as the issues that we set out to explore.

When Are Pedagogical Methods Perceived as Innovative?

The first set of questions inquired about students' experiences with innovative pedagogical techniques in classrooms. Respondents were asked to describe their experiences in detail and, subsequently, were asked to explain why they thought such techniques were innovative. For example, a question in this section stated, "For

each case, exactly what did the teacher do that made you think his/her action was innovative? Organize your response as follows: Their method was innovative because..." The responses from the students indicated that they deliberated considerably on this section. A wide spectrum of responses were provided, which are tabulated in Table 1. Overall, it appears that certain pedagogical techniques are perceived as innovative when they (1) induce greater involvement among students, (2) improve the overall classroom environment, (3) convey obvious and lasting learning benefits, (4) are flexible to student needs, and (5) employ a variety of instructional material and supplemental aids. Actual student responses are grouped under these categories in Table 1.

TABLE 1 WHEN ARE PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES PERCEIVED AS INNOVATIVE?	
Categories	Student Comments
Involvement Inducing Teaching Methodology	When the instructor got the class involved Changes from routine; Less monotony Forces you to pay attention See and experience what the instructor is talking about Ensured student understanding Made boring topics more interesting I wanted to do well because I cared about the time and effort invested by the instructor
Classroom Environment	Created and maintained interesting learning environment High comfort level Decreased boredom Made us want to participate Paid more attention in class Could ask for help whenever needed Encouraged interaction Encouraged attendance Increased participation
Cognitive Outcomes	Improved memory and retention Made me think creatively and critically Related to material better
Teaching Style	When some control is given to students Empowering students Allowed students to work in groups Online exercises allowed flexible work hours Used hands-on approach Demonstrated how to utilize concepts in real world
Instructional Materials Used	Used current events as examples Non-orthodox text Real-world examples Brought technology/Internet into the classroom Music and visual aids leave a lasting impression

How Important Are Innovative Pedagogical Techniques?

As to the importance of innovative pedagogical techniques, the respondents unanimously stated that they are important to the overall classroom experience. In fact, marketing students seem to *expect* innovative pedagogical techniques to be incorporated into their courses. As one respondent stated, "attitudes are changing . . . the blackboard was for our grandparents, not us." The importance of pedagogical innovations is explicitly placed into perspective by another respondent: "College is ultimately about teaching people to think in a creative and critical manner and innovative [pedagogical] techniques are the

best way to do that." A concise list of the perceived outcomes is presented in Table 2. Additionally, as reported in Table 3, our study indicates that students expect courses with innovative pedagogical techniques to be harder, relative to other courses. However, they also expressed that the extra effort invested into the course aids in improved learning and better retention. In fact, more than 90 percent of the respondents reported that they expect to perform better in courses with innovative pedagogical techniques. Students expressed that innovative techniques force them to pay attention in class and, as a result, they do not have to teach themselves the material prior to exams.

Categories	Student Comments
Involvement	Grasp material better rather than memorizing it
	Acquire better knowledge
	Get more out of the class
	Sustain interest to improve understanding
	More involvement in the classroom
	Makes you want to learn
	Increase motivation to attend class more regularly
Classroom Environment	Connect with different learning styles of students
	Easier to stay focused
	Reduces boredom
	Beats the rut
	Students do not zone out
	Encourage learning by making material more interesting
	Differentiates topics from those in other courses
Immediate Classroom Benefits	Have fun while learning
	Enjoy the classroom experience
	Encourages participation
	Improves retention of key concepts
	Improves attendance
	Better performance/grades
Overall Benefits	Overcome stage fright
	Improve oral and written communication skills
	Improve analytical skills and critical thinking
	Helps on the job
	Prepares you for the real world
	Ability to use concepts in real-world
	Experience in marketing situations
	Higher quality of education

TABLE 3
PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS, EFFORT, AND PERFORMANCE

Amount of effort students expect to expend in a course	More	83.75 %
where the instructor uses innovative pedagogical	Same	13.75 %
techniques, relative to other courses	Less	2.50 %
How students expect to perform in a course where the	Better	93.75 %
instructor uses innovative pedagogical techniques,	Same	6.25 %
relative to other courses	Worse	0.00 %

TABLE 4 CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATIVE INSTRUCTORS

Exemplar Responses

Cares about the material

Shows interest in students' learning progress

Uses entertaining activities in which students want to participate

Open-minded

Technology-savvy

Creative

Capability and willingness to be different

Relates better to student requirements

Passionate/excited about teaching

Not afraid to get away from the norm to get the message across

Motivates students

Driven; energetic; enthusiastic

Stimulates learning

Facilitates learning through unconventional methods

Fits material to students' needs

Open to students' responses

Does not take themselves too seriously

Persuasive

How Are Innovative Instructors Perceived?

Table 4 presents the list of characteristics identified by marketing students as representative of innovative instructors. These characteristics are fairly similar to those of master teachers identified by Smart, Kelley, and Conant (2003). Several studies have explored desirable attributes of successful educators. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review those, we emphasize the critical relationship between instructor characteristics and student perceptions of pedagogical innovations. For ex-

ample, not all passionate or knowledgeable instructors need to adopt innovative techniques. However, all instructors who attempt innovative pedagogical techniques must necessarily possess some distinct skills, traits, and qualities. As one respondent summarizes, "If you are going to be innovative, make sure you know your stuff. Otherwise, it will be confusing."

Students consistently report that pedagogical techniques influence their appreciation of their instructors ("Show teachers are committed to the students") and their own performance ("I always get an A in classes where

innovative methods are used"). While identifying several benefits of pedagogical innovations, respondents also offered some words of caution that could potentially be insightful to instructors considering or employing pedagogical techniques. First, while students regard pedagogical innovations highly, they caution against relying too heavily on such techniques. As one student stated, "The most important thing is that the teacher is knowledgeable and passionate." Second, while students stated a strong preference for techniques that break the monotony, they

also expressed a fear of the instructor trying too many new and, ultimately, confusing approaches. The complete list of students' responses as to when they perceive pedagogical innovations as successful is presented in Table 5.

Where Do Marketing Students See the Need for More Pedagogical Innovations?

In order to gauge marketing students' response to this issue, students were provided with twelve pre-determined

TABLE 5 WHEN ARE PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS PERCEIVED AS SUCCESSFUL?

Exemplar Responses

- Grab students' attention and keep them motivated
- ♦ Improve classroom environment
- ♦ Foster learning
- ♦ Help students focus, learn, and apply material
- ♦ Leave a lasting impression
- Encourage students to pay more attention
- ♦ Give students a chance to do better
- ♦ Student care enough to attend classes
- Increase interest level in the subject matter
- ♦ Help retention of material
- Reduce the need to self-teach before exams
- Make lectures fun to attend; enjoyable
- Capture the students' minds
- ♦ Make students think about the material
- Integrate concepts with student creativity ("When students are given the opportunity to use their imagination, they are more likely to stay interested")
- ♦ Challenge the student to be innovative
- ♦ Students learn what they need and are glad they learned it
- Students develop the desire to learn
- ♦ More retention and less cramming

TABLE 6 PEDAGOGICAL AREAS WHERE INNOVATIONS ARE WARRANTED Course Material Supplemental Assignments Term Project

(Other areas mentioned by respondents include: Attendance policies, role playing exercises, guest speakers, facultystudent interaction, homework, exam reviews, punctuality, class layout, electronic texts, and nontraditional classroom settings)

categories. Then, they were asked to assign scores ranging from one (most important) to twelve (least important) to each category depending on their importance. The tabulated results are presented in Table 6. From reviewing the table and weighting the results, it is revealed that marketing students identify "lectures" as the primary area for more pedagogical innovations. This category is followed by others such as presentation style, course material, and steps to improve student participation. It is noteworthy that categories such as exams, cases, and projects rank lower, adding more support to the argument that pedagogical innovations should not be so radical as to confuse the students. With regard to specific marketing courses, the

Lecture

Material

Style

In-Class

Cases

Exams

Student

Grading

Policies

Classroom

Group Work

Participation

Presentation

respondents identified the introductory principles of marketing course, sales management and retailing as some courses where more innovation is warranted (see Table 7). It seems that students expect to see more innovations in broad, introductory level marketing courses rather than in advanced, content knowledge specific marketing courses.

DISCUSSION

The results of our study have several implications for marketing pedagogy. First and foremost, students appreciate pedagogical innovations for their complementary role in making the classroom environment livelier. How-

TABLE 7
MARKETING COURSES WHERE MORE INNOVATIONS ARE WARRANTED

Courses	Percentage
Introduction to Marketing	42.50%
Sales	32.50%
Retailing	32.50%
Marketing Research	17.50%
International Marketing	17.50%
Channels	8.75%
Consumer Behavior	6.25%
Others	11.25%

ever, they caution that pedagogical innovations cannot simply substitute an instructor's knowledge and passion. Therefore, it is imperative that marketing instructors also look at pedagogical innovations for their complementary benefits. Second, students expect the courses that use pedagogical innovations to be harder and more rewarding. That is, innovations that may be harder to implement in the classroom and that may require additional efforts from the students do not pose any problems as long as students are made to realize the benefits of the pedagogical innovations.

Third, students expect the instructors to be knowledgeable about the innovations. Therefore, learning about pedagogical innovations only through "implementation in a classroom" may prove detrimental. Marketing instructors should carefully analyze and learn about the pedagogical innovation prior to classroom implementation. Fourth, students also seemed to have problems with over-reliance on and over-indulgence in pedagogical innovations. Specifically, as implementation of pedagogical innovations requires additional efforts, students expect fewer innovations per class. Consequently, marketing instructors should focus on fewer, less-confusing innovations per class that do not veer away from the learning objectives of the specific course.

Fifth, with reference to areas in which students see the need for pedagogical innovations, students gave more importance to lectures, presentation style, course material, and student participation than to exams, cases, and projects. That is, while students want more innovations that make the classroom more involving, they do not want more innovations with reference to activities pertaining to their evaluation. Sixth, students also expect more innovations in broad, introductory, and concept-loaded courses. Therefore, marketing instructors who are required to teach lecture-based, introductory courses should focus on pedagogical innovations that can make the class more involving and interesting without compromising on the content knowledge.

Finally, our study also has implications for future research in pedagogical innovations. Following the objectives of this study, we investigated certain critical factors that lead to and follow from marketing students' perceptions of pedagogical innovations. We acknowledge the exploratory nature of this study and, therefore, strongly urge researchers to conduct further research in this area. Specifically, future research could potentially focus on developing a conceptual framework that could be used to explain and predict (a) factors influencing perceived innovativeness of pedagogical techniques and (b) the impact of such perceptions on relevant outcomes. Our study suggests that student perceptions of pedagogical innovativeness stem from an assimilation of both instructor, as well as, innovation characteristics. Support for this premise also exists in studies that indicate that student perceptions of the instructors' personality as a dominant factor in evaluations of teaching effectiveness (e.g., Chen, Gupta, and Hoshower 2004; Clayson 1999). Also, research on innovation adoption has traditionally maintained that individuals' perceptions of an innovation are a function of factors such as usefulness, ease of use, and complexity, among others (e.g., Davis, Bagozzi, and Warshaw 1989; Taylor and Todd 1995; Venkatesh et al. 2003). Further, the framework could also develop certain exemplar intermediate and ultimate outcomes that emerged in our exploratory study. By intermediate outcomes, we imply factors that could facilitate and/or improve student learning and performance. By ultimate outcomes, we imply factors that are long-term in nature and could prevail even after the conclusion of the classroom experience. Future studies need to empirically validate these factors, among others, in the context of student perceptions of innovative pedagogical techniques.

In summary, our study results reveal that: (1) keeping with the times, marketing students seem to expect pedagogical innovations in their classes, (2) increased involvement, better classroom environment, better performance,

motivation, creativity, and learning are potential outcomes of pedagogical innovations, and (3) educators' efforts to use pedagogical innovations are appreciated by marketing students. The findings of this exploratory study could be useful to marketing educators who are either planning to or are currently using pedagogical innovations in their classrooms. While the pursuit of innovations in pedagogy is an admirable task, marketing educators should pay heed to how their students perceive such innovations. Further research on (1) students' perceptions with regards to specific innovative techniques and (2) specific antecedents and outcomes of pedagogical innovations could better facilitate the development and dissemination of such pedagogical innovations. As proponents of the benefits of customer orientation for innovation, we (marketing instructors) owe it to the discipline to remain student oriented in our pedagogical innovation efforts.

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