“Overture, Curtains, Lights...”: Engaging 'Millennial' Marketing Students through Business Theatre.

Glenn Pearce, University of Western Sydney
Ian Braithwaite, Charles Sturt University

Abstract

Engaging university students of a millennial generation is a learning challenge currently facing marketing educators. In an attempt to engage millennial students and depart from the typically low-key introduction associated with the first class in many marketing units, a piece of business theatre, inspired by the theatre in education movement, was performed in a core, second-year Marketing Communications unit. Interpretive research, via a cartoon test, sought to explore student perceptions of business theatre's educational contribution. Findings from the exploratory study suggest that students perceived the business theatre activity to be attention-grabbing, different and beneficial to their learning. Results of the pilot study have implications for educators seeking new means for engaging students by altering teacher-student dynamics and fostering a positive learning environment.

Introduction

Universities are currently facing a number of student learning challenges which include: accommodating, engaging and motivating a new generation of learners - 'Millennial', otherwise known as 'Generation Y' - (Bruneau and Campbell, 2004; Nimon, 2007), attracting and retaining students in an increasingly competitive higher education sector (ACER, 2008) and the controversial issue of learners seeing themselves as educational 'customers' (Anderson, Johnson and Saha, 2002).

Millennial 'customers' have grown-up in a world of reality TV, ‘Myspace’, ‘Facebook’, ‘Second Life’ and SMS. These technologies offer insight into the ways academics need to communicate, relate to and engage with ‘Millenials’. Unless educators captivate student interest, students are likely to become alienated, disengaged and lose motivation and eventually discontinue their course of study. According to Nimon (2007 p.36) “they will not hesitate to vote with their feet if they feel unappreciated or dissatisfied”. One of the symptoms of such disengagement is poor attendance at traditional lectures (Dolnicar, 2005) where in a teacher-centered lecture, the role of 'sage on stage' is adopted (Bruneau and Campbell, 2004).

Student engagement has become a valuable method for interpreting the relationship between students and institutions because universities play an influential role in allocating resources and creating learning opportunities that are critical for student learning (Kuh, 2006; Coates, 2006). Hu and Kuh (2002 p.555) define student engagement as “the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes”.

Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning outcomes (Kuh et al., 2005) and personal development. Students involved in educationally productive activities in college develop life-long habits that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development (Carini et al., 2006).
In order to engage students, teachers need to take into account, aspects such as: individual differences in the learning styles of students (Biggs, 1987); variations in student motivation (Komarraju and Karau, 2008); and instructional techniques that facilitate active learning (Grasha, 1994).

This paper examines the use of business theatre, a form of theatre-in-education, in facilitating engagement among millennial students. Preliminary findings are presented from an exploratory study into student perceptions of the business theatre activity and possible contributions to student learning.

**Theatre in Education and Business Theatre**

The use of drama for learning is an instructional technique that facilitates student engagement (Johnson and Hughes, 1997). Theatre-in-education (T.I.E.) (Jackson, 1980; Jackson, 1999; O'Toole, 1976; O'Toole, 1992) is a form of educational drama that allows students to view and learn from a dramatic performance staged for educational rather than entertainment purposes. Actors give a live performance to and interact with an audience in a subject and area of study relevant to some aspect of curricula. In this sense, actors can include academics, students or outside performers. It has been claimed that T.I.E. can make a contribution to the (1) cognitive, (2) affective, (3) imaginative and (4) social development of learners (O'Toole, 1976). O'Toole (1976, p. 41) argues that the visual and involving nature of T.I.E. facilitates remembering and understanding in accordance with the ancient Chinese proverb, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand”.

When used in a business context T.I.E is commonly known as: ‘Business theatre’. The public relations industry uses this term to refer to a theatrical performance incorporated into events such as product launches, trade shows displays and conference presentations. A piece of business theatre was devised and enacted by the lecturer and one of the co-authors of this paper, at the beginning of the first class in a second-year, core unit - Marketing Communications. The purpose of the six minute theatrical activity for was fourfold: 1) 'launch' the unit to students; 2) differentiate the class opening from typical low-key introductions that occur in most first classes at university; 3) grab student attention using elements of theatre such as movement, sound and props; and 4) relate the audience's response to the communication process.

The business theatre activity involved the following: After 'safety marshals' cleared the way, the lecturer and an accomplice rode into the lecture theatre on the back of a motorbike, to the tune of a 'heavy metal' soundtrack, dressed in wigs and costumes as 'rockers from hell'. After dismounting, the lecturer followed a choreographed routine using a whip and other props. The routine ended with the lecturer revealing a message on a screen that said, 'Welcome to Marketing Communications - enjoy the ride!'

**Methodology**

One week after exposing students to the business theatre activity, students were invited to participate in a cartoon test. Participation in the projective test research was both voluntary and anonymous. Without forewarning, students were instructed by the lecturer to project themselves into a cartoon and complete the empty cartoon bubble, in response to the following statement: “Think back to the start of last week’s class in Marketing Communications when
the subject commenced with theatre using a Biker theme. Tell us what this theatrical activity meant to you in terms of your learning in the subject.” The two main research objectives were to one, ascertain what students would say about the business theatre activity thereby and two, determine any linkages the activity had towards learning in the unit.

In order for the lecturer to vacate the classroom, thereby not potentially biasing student responses, the lecturer appointed a student to oversee the collection of completed responses. Students were encouraged to say what they really thought/felt and were given 10 minutes to complete the evaluation task. Although a total of 80 students were enrolled in the class, 58 responses were collected. Written responses were transcribed into a Word document for subsequent computer-based analysis using NVivo (Bazeley and Richards, 2000). Transcribed responses were labelled for identification purposes as HR1 to 58.

**Findings**

Student responses to business theatre activity are shown in Figure 1. Student expectations of subjects are influenced by past experiences in terms of how subjects are introduced to students and the general structure of the class (‘...very different to the usual boring introduction that lecturers give, I now perceive the subject to be fun! A great way to learn!!’ - HR41)

The business theatre activity challenged the students' traditional notion of teacher student dynamics and classroom environment. Student responses have been classified into three areas: 1) Engaging students in learning, changing conceptions of learning and influencing motivation; 2) Specific insights into the marketing communications subject; and 3) Connections to other marketing subjects.

1) **Business theatre engaging students, changing their conceptions of learning and influencing their motivation towards university study.**

Students perceived the business theatre as being: a) symbolic of an initiative that allows them to take responsibility for their own learning (Trying to get student attention and trying to tell students what the lecturer is expected to be in this class. Moreover, it explains that lecturer can be only vehicle to educate student and students have to learn by themselves'. - HR16); b) motivating (‘… gave me a positive outlook to the subject that wasn't even an hour old'- HR36); c) fun (… ’learning could be fun, not all reading just sitting passively in a lecture theatre’ - HR1); d) helping them understand subject expectations (‘It made me understand what the subject was going to be about and what was going to be expected of me'- HR2); e) arousing curiosity (‘Subject will involve getting attention, raising curiosity about a particular thing, and trying to figure out what is happening.’ - HR4); f) relaxing them through humour (… ’It was different and amusing, it made me feel more relaxed and hopeful that this subject will be enjoyable and easy to participate freely and openly in.’- HR16); g) giving them insight into and optimism for the subject (’it made me feel the semester wasn't going to be all boring - it might be surprising and entertaining and enjoyable, as well as educational’- HR8); h) making them interested; (‘It made me think that the subject would be interesting...it was so in your face’ - HR21) and i) stimulating their minds (‘...was more stimulating to the mind because initially it was sprung on us a surprise which helped convey meaning through or an unorthodox way of conveying a message'- HR27); and j) generally gaining their attention (‘The skit helped grab my attention and get interested in what was going on’ – HR13).
2) Specific insights gained into the marketing communications subject.

Students indicated that the business theatre activity helped them: a) understand the importance of gaining the student audience's attention (‘The activity was different from any lecture I’ve ever experienced! I was sitting there wondering whether he was the lecturer! The lecturers at Uni usually come in and begin speaking. It was really refreshing and different to make me sit up and listen’ – HR31); and b) appreciate the importance of gaining attention when communicating in a marketing sense (‘the activity showed us that to communicate with your audience you must have their attention, and this was a demonstration of how you can get people's attention’ – HR51). Students also saw communication in a broader context other than just advertising and promotion (‘...you were trying to convey to us that communication can be portrayed in many different ways. Meaning that communication is basically anything where you put an idea across to an audience’ – HR35).

3) Connections to other marketing subjects and professional practice.

Students saw the business theatre activity in terms of becoming a ‘marketer’ and practicing product differentiation, creativity and alternative approaches of communicating with target markets (‘It showed me that to be heard and noticed, sometimes you have to be different and stand out from the rest. This can relate to marketing a product very well. Products must be differentiated from all other products out there today’- HR53).

Figure 1: Student responses to a business theatre activity

Discussion

This qualitative study provides a starting point for understanding what marketing students 'make' of business theatre. In terms of the perceived benefits of business theatre, findings support the view of Leigh and Kinder (1999) that students prefer and benefit from learning activity that is engaging and fun.
The attention grabbing nature of the theatre was such that it stimulated active listening and thinking about what was going on and what might happen next, due to the element of suspense. The essential link between student attention and engaged learning has been articulated by Yair (2000, p248), who states: ‘To learn, students have to pay attention to whatever transpires in the instructional moment. If they do not focus on the immediate instructional context, they will not experience instructional opportunities or gain from the potential effects of these opportunities on their achievements, knowledge and interests.’

The study offers useful insights for marketing educators by exploring student reaction to business theatre as a means of engaging students. There are sufficient positives to emerge from the study to suggest that business theatre offers educators a viable strategy for changing the dynamic between lecturer, and introducing some ‘good old fashion fun’ into the classroom, thereby contributing to a positive and supportive learning environment. The resulting improved dynamic and environment may in turn influence the degree of student engagement and motivation for learning, as well as subject specific and disciplinary insights.

Results of this preliminary study suggest that educational institutions need to cultivate and support unorthodox instructional techniques, such as business theatre, that promise to enhance student engagement. Kuh (2006) reinforced this view by suggesting that engaging pedagogies need to be mainstream activities within and not relegated to the periphery of the institution.

Some examples of how business theatre could be incorporated into university marketing education are: a) An actor plays the role of Sigmund Freud and reflects on his theory of personality and implications for modern marketing practice; b) A short play is staged (10-15 minutes) that reviews unit terminology, issues, theories and themes; c) Professional puppeteers create and perform a show that highlights important aspects of the unit's content (similar proposal to b) above but utilising puppetry as an imaginary way of putting the story across); d) using a military analogy, a marketing strategist sits in a tent and discusses strategy in terms of a battle plan; and e) An elaborate but time intensive activity is to stage an on-going marketing-type soap opera based around unit. Such an idea may encourage students to attend class and engage with unit content

There were a number of limitations associated with this exploratory study. One limitation was that other lecturers teaching marketing communications on other campuses of the same university did not use the business theatre activity. Consequently it was not possible to make comparisons across different student cohorts and lecturers undertaking the same subject. A second limitation is no classification data such as gender, nationality and age of respondents could be collected as the identities of the respondents were anonymous. Such data would be necessary to determine if student perceptions of business theatre and its relevance to learning varies by age, gender, educational background or nationality.

Future research might involve larger numbers of students and quantitative analysis, an examination of alternative forms of business theatre and the use/evaluation of business theatre in units other than marketing communications. Further research is required because although business theatre is not a panacea to all teaching ills, it does appear to hold promise as a way of extending the repertoire of instructional methods for engaging millennial students in the process of learning.
References


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