

## **Higher Education Academy Newsletter #4, June 2012**

**Title: Marketing technologists or educated marketers?**

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**Keywords: Marketing curriculum, curriculum design, marketing education**

Are you a confused marketing educator? I am. And, frankly, it's quite an alarming sensation after you've been doing this for over 20 years. I would have thought that by now I should have a fairly solid grasp of what a university marketing education is for. But a number of recent conversations, with colleagues from both 'old' and 'new' universities, have given me pause for thought.

What is it that gives rise to this sense of unease? I suppose it is the questioning of certain of my own taken-for-granted assumptions, prompted by conversations with some marketing educators who (it is fair to say) are generally quite a lot younger than me. From my, possibly old-fashioned, point of view, marketing concerns important social, economic and cultural processes involved with bringing about voluntary exchanges. In broad terms marketing is ubiquitous within human societies, and is beneficial. Generally speaking, voluntary exchanges are a good thing and create value for all parties. There are exceptions, and these are very interesting cases for students of marketing. For example, where information or power asymmetries in the exchange process mean that one of the exchange partners is misinformed or disadvantaged (and the other party may or may not exploit this), or where externalities associated with the exchange mean that people who are not parties to the exchange are adversely affected (positive externalities can also occur, of course). Such cases raise interesting questions of moral philosophy. There are also interesting boundary questions. While this notion of marketing works neatly and clearly when the parties to the exchange are involved in transferring ownership of something, it becomes knottier when we begin to talk about social marketing, or political marketing, and similar circumstances where the central idea of mutually beneficial exchange is less clear. This is absolutely not to say that social marketing and political marketing are illegitimate subjects for research and teaching. Rather, it is to say that the boundaries of the marketing discipline are unclear, giving rise to potentially very interesting intellectual explorations for scholars and students alike.

From the perspective of the previous paragraph, a marketing education is concerned, broadly, with understanding the social, economic and cultural processes associated with the creation of successful, sustainable, voluntary, mutually beneficial exchanges. The boundaries of the marketing discipline are both interesting and problematic. Aspects of moral philosophy are pertinent. And, of course, the specific marketing institutions, practices and artefacts characteristic of the culture in which one is teaching marketing are also a matter of considerable importance. So, having understood the social, economic and cultural context within which marketing processes are embedded, the conditions favourable and unfavourable to voluntary, mutually beneficial exchanges, the moral and ethical considerations associated with these processes, and the complexities associated with the definition and boundaries of marketing—the student can then be introduced to specific marketing institutions, practices and artefacts. Of particular interest to many students are the marketing institutions, practices and artefacts associated with late market capitalism, such as the limited liability public company, the marketing department, the marketing plan, customer relationship management systems and the paraphernalia of marketing communications.

I will excuse those of you who are rolling on the floor laughing at this naïve straw-man characterisation. Perhaps I am being a little mischievous, and perhaps this is not an entirely accurate representation of my own views. Indeed I have previously gone on the record as a supporter of the “professional school” approach to marketing education advocated by John Schibrowsky, James Peltier, and Thomas Boyt (2002). But, for the moment, let us accept my characterisation as a legitimate, if unusually abstract, basis for an academic marketing curriculum.

Let me contrast my own straw-man of an idealistic marketing curriculum with the view that I have heard recently from a number of marketing educators. This is the view firstly, that the purpose of a university marketing education is to prepare students for marketing jobs; secondly, that preparing students for marketing jobs means teaching them as far as possible exactly the know-what and the know-how that they need to do those jobs (and nothing else); and, thirdly, that the key source of information relevant to the marketing curriculum is, therefore, marketing practitioners. Pushed to its logical conclusion this curriculum would start and end with a particular set of marketing institutions, practices and artefacts. Naturally, there must also be a nod in the direction of “life-long learning”, since institutions, practices and artefacts change; but the impoverished extent of this “life-long learning” is the ability to update one’s skills in the use of the marketing technologies of the day. Whatever may be the explicit definition of marketing taught within such a curriculum, the implicit definition is very clear indeed: “marketing is a set of technologies designed to improve the chances that customers will behave as you want them to”. Information and power asymmetries are no longer barriers to mutually beneficial voluntary exchanges, but are contingencies to be manipulated to advantage (notably as in the still current practice of “confusion marketing”). Negative externalities are only a concern if they threaten adverse public relations or regulatory consequences (in which case the appropriate stakeholders must be effectively managed). Positive externalities should, if possible, be marketised and monetised. Moral philosophy is eliminated leaving, at best, the question of how to implement the corporate or professional body code of conduct. In each case—the social embeddedness of market transactions, information and power asymmetries, externalities, and questions of moral philosophy—the richness, complexity and subtlety of the underlying ideas is ruthlessly pruned to leave only that which is thought to be relevant to the practitioner. Much of what is intrinsically interesting about studying marketing is lost in the process.

Would that I could contend that both of the straw men presented above were equally influential and that practical marketing educators were treading a happy medium between the two. But my suspicion is that the latter—let’s call it the “marketing technology paradigm”—seems to be the one that is centre stage at the moment. The former—let’s call that the “embedded marketing paradigm”—seems to have few advocates. For example, congratulations to Paul Harrigan and Bev Hulbert for publishing an article that has remained in the *Journal of Marketing Education*’s “top 20 most-read” for several months (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011). This article strongly advocates the “marketing technology paradigm” of marketing education, and has clearly engaged the attention of marketing educators. Harrigan and Hulbert contend that: “we are at a stage where marketing academia has a lot to learn from marketing practice. The problem in this case is that the marketing academia, through its education of students, is not reflecting what is happening in marketing practice and thus not delivering marketing graduates with the skills to actually work in marketing” (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011: 254).

Now, to return to the beginning, I can see that one way to cease to be a confused marketing educator would be, simply, to accept (or at least to acquiesce to) the “marketing technology paradigm”. Why not? Clearly it could simply be stubbornness on my part—an unwillingness to change, a reluctance to engage in lifelong learning. Yes, that’s probably part of it. However, and being a little more kind to myself, perhaps I am concerned on behalf of marketing students. Other students enjoy rich intellectual lives at university. Their ideas are challenged, they learn to re-assess pre-conceived ideas and engage with new and different points of view, and whole new ways of seeing the world are revealed to them. They are, in a word, educated. So, why not marketing students? Marketing is a potentially complex and rich field of study, encompassing aspects of sociology, economics, anthropology, cultural and media studies, moral philosophy and more besides. I can see that a marketing graduate should be able to design a reasonably coherent questionnaire, write a decent piece of advertising copy, and use Facebook to promote a brand, among other practical skills. But I’m not sure I see why they have to suffer an intellectually impoverished university education to that end.

#### References

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