There can be no learning without action and no action without learning

A case study

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to present an example of action learning in marketing – the unique postgraduate programme in marketing called the marketing development programme (MDP). This uniqueness arises in three main ways. First, the MDP is open only to those students with no work experience. Second, it employs action learning as the central pedagogy rather than an add-on. Finally, it is a rolling programme with overlapping intakes and as such appears to have no beginning and no end. There are two important streams of learning to be harvested from such a programme. First, the MDP has for more than 20 years educated young marketers through affording them the opportunity to learn from marketing action within a supportive learning environment. The second is that there can be no action without learning, that is, the MDP has learned from its experience and created new learning for participants as a result. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the MDP for marketing education, theory and practice.

Introduction

One of the pioneers of action learning, Reg Revans, maintains that “there can be no learning without action and no action without learning” (Revans, 1998, p. 83). This approach to learning is relevant for those in the professional disciplines such as marketing who teach in business schools, because they seek to bridge the gap between intellectual endeavour and the need for professional competence. This challenge has led to some controversy in marketing as authors argue for either a more or a less vocational orientation (see for example Piercy, 2002; Wensley, 2002).

One difficulty with the promotion of a vocational orientation is that it rarely discusses what is relevant to the teaching of new marketers and managers and...
how education can be made more managerially relevant. Moreover, much education in marketing is focussed on the pre-experience student with no prior vocational background. Thus it is worth considering a marketing education alternative that might suit this particular group.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a programme that has adopted action learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The objective of the programme is for participants to both prepare themselves for the world of work and gain the ability to continue to accelerate their development over the whole of their career. The uniqueness of this programme arises in the features it employs to achieve its objective. First, this course employs action learning as its central pedagogical device rather than an additional feature. Second, the course is available only to immediate graduates. Finally, the programme is managed through overlapping intakes. What this means is that each new class of students joins a pre-existing class and benefits from their expertise. The basic action learning model employed by the MDP is for students to work on a variety of commercial assignments over an academic year, in a supportive learning environment. During that period, they are required to reflect on their own learning in a learning log, through learning sets and in a series of appraisals with members of the management team.

The remainder of this paper sets out to demonstrate how this course achieves its objectives and has developed towards its current configuration, in three sections. The first is a brief description of the institutional structure that supports action learning in the MDP. The main body of the paper examines six major tensions that have arisen in the action learning process of the MDP and the creative approach that has been adopted to their resolution. The final section considers the implications of the case study for action learning and practice, marketing education and marketing theory.

The institutional structure for learning in the Marketing Development Programme
The Marketing Development Programme (MDP) is a unit of the Department of Marketing at the Michael Smurfit Graduate School of Business, University College, Dublin. The programme offers a MSc in Marketing Practice to 40 students each year. Founded in 1982 by Prof. Anthony Cunningham, the objective was to produce a marketing professional with the potential for an immediate impact on their first employer’s business and with the capacity for long-term, personal and professional development. The pedagogic approach employed was action learning. The objective of the MDP was to provide a teaching hospital environment like that offered to medical and veterinarian students within which action learning could take place. Within this set up, students would learn not just about marketing, as they had done in their undergraduate days, but also about how to act as professional marketers.
This programme has gone through a number of revisions in the ensuing 20 years. However, it still abides by its core objectives through a basic action learning process and a stable if evolving structure. These issues of process and system are discussed in the following two sections.

*The process of learning in the Marketing Development Programme*

Marketing advisors (as the students are referred to) are required to attend the MDP offices between the hours of 9.15 a.m. and 5.30 p.m. each day. They are obliged to wear business attire and at the end of a first week of intensive induction, each advisor is required to sign a code of professional conduct. This binds them to act professionally and maintain client confidentiality. These basic institutional structures lay the foundations for the professional development process.

During their 11 months on the MDP, each marketing advisor can expect to participate in between four and six assignments for commercial clients of the programme. These assignments typically involve advisors in completing market research on an issue of importance to client companies. Unlike much standard market research, however, these reports go beyond simple compilation of results. Rather they strive to provide clients with reasonably detailed interpretations and recommendations that they might employ to use the research results in practice. The assignments vary in length, industry sector and complexity and typically last 8-10 weeks.

The projects are of real commercial value to their sponsors. A full commercial fee (less a “learning discount”) is charged for completion of these projects. This approach to pricing reflects the contribution of marketing advisors who are developing professionals. It also reflects the commitment of the MDP to encouraging students to take decisions that will lead to the development of positive experiences. Such an approach can lead to errors, omissions and faults that can delay reporting to clients or similar problems, and justifies the learning discount.

It could be argued that given the learning objectives of the programme, clients should be charged a low or zero fee. There are some problems with such an approach. The most significant is the unwillingness of clients not paying a market rate, to commit to interacting with marketing advisors. That is, they simply do not take projects seriously unless they are paying a significant price. In the absence of such client commitment, student learning is likely to be low.

*The learning support system of the Marketing Development Programme*

As suggested in the action learning literature (e.g. McGill and Beaty, 1992) the centre of the action learning process is the learning set. For MDP students these sets are pre-arranged combinations of gender, background and personality designed to optimise the potential for interaction and learning. These groups
are intended to be the location in which students collectively reflect on their experiences.

**Mentors**
Another feature of the MDP for the marketing advisor is the mentor programme. Each learning set is assigned a mentor with whom they meet on a monthly basis. These mentors have two features. They are individuals of significant standing in the business community. Perhaps more importantly, they are known as people with a commitment to the personal development of young managers. The mentors are entirely independent within the programme structure. This position arises via the personal status of the individuals involved but also because they play no role in the assessment of advisor performance. Consequently, advisors have been found to be totally frank with their mentors regarding their difficulties with developing as professionals. Such frankness allows individual solutions to be arrived at between the mentor, the learning set and the individual. It also allows mentors to provide strong feedback to the programme management team on issues and opportunities related to advisor learning.

**Practice assessors**
A practice assessor is usually appointed to an assignment at the same time as a team of advisors is. His or her other brief is to assess progress based on their own commercial expertise, but not to direct advisors. In so doing they ensure that the work completed by marketing advisors is of an acceptable commercial standard. They are typically available to students on an “as required” basis, that is, they will meet with students on *ad hoc* basis during the research process to discuss project execution and completion issues. The practice assessors also maintain close contact with the programme managers, described below, to ensure quality standards are being met and that learning opportunities are identified. Practice assessors are typically graduates of the MDP with two to three years work experience.

**Programme managers**
The MDP has a full-time management team consisting of two commercial managers and a programme manager. The programme manager’s responsibility is for all aspects of academic administration and for the process of report distribution. An experienced university administrator fills this post on a permanent basis. The commercial managers are typically graduates of the programme with some work experience who return to manage commercial activity and, more importantly, the personal development process of marketing advisors. The individuals who fill these roles often feel a tension between the need for commercial compliance and the education of the marketing advisors. As will be discussed later, this is a central tension of action
learning of this kind. It has been our experience of the programme that it can only be managed if that tension resides in the job descriptions of the commercial managers. Experiments with dedicated commercial and human resource managers who do not try to address this tension, have not been found to be effective.

The above description explains the basic process and structure of the Marketing Development Programme and its approach to action learning. In the following section, the dynamic nature of the application of this model will be discussed.

Managing the long-term tensions of action learning

In the previous section the basic structure and process of the MDP was outlined. The purpose of the section was to introduce the idea of a facilitating structure for action learning. In this section, it will be demonstrated that the achievement of such a structure, although challenging in itself, is insufficient. Rather, an entrepreneurial approach must be adopted within which the learning structure and process are constantly reflected upon to allow what has been described as the learning membrane (Cunningham, 1995) to be stretched to incorporate new and experimental activities on an ongoing basis. The pressures for this primarily arise from the challenges that involvement with a commercial enterprise pose to the organisation and to management of the programme. In addition, the reflective process of marketing advisors unavoidably feeds back into programme development process.

These two dynamics are captured through a reflective rather than a strategy driven approach to management. This process is managed through a variety of structures. The most frequent is a regular management meeting in which the primary issues of advisor development, commercial activity and emerging issues are considered. This is the first point at which concerns of advisors, practice assessors or managers emerge. Quarterly meetings with the mentor teams also often reveal problems with, or opportunities for, new learning. Nevertheless, the most significant device for the evaluation of action in recent years has been the exit interviews with each graduating marketing advisor. Much of the change discussed below originated from ideas suggested at this stage.

In the following subsections, six major challenges that have faced the action learning structure and process outlined earlier will be highlighted. The outcome of this section is to provide an insight into some valuable and exciting developments in marketing education that will have resonance for other educators.

Meeting a challenge to project quality through overlapping intakes

The MDP has relied on the ongoing support of its client network and positive word-of-mouth regarding its services. This business model has been an
effective one and a regular flow of quality projects has always been available. However, in the early 1990s, it was noted that those clients with the most challenging projects were tending to offer assignments in the later months of the programme. These clients also tended to be those who typically had the longest experience of working with the MDP and the fullest appreciation of its pedagogical approach. Upon questioning, the clients concerned explained that they were simply taking advantage of the increased expertise and professionalism of marketing advisors towards the end of their period with the MDP. However, this practice raised the problems of advisors not having the time to complete valuable assignments before their degree programme was due to finish, with their attendant learning opportunities cost. However, if the MDP programme failed to take on work of this kind, it would have had a negative affect on the franchise of the MDP in the marketplace.

A member of the mentor panel provided a solution with a particular resonance with action learning. The suggestion was for an overlapping intake of marketing advisors that would “even out” the quality of assignments. This was implemented by having a spring intake of 10-12 marketing advisors, in addition to the normal autumn one. These recruits were inducted and educated in the same way as the autumn intake was, and interacted with the advisors of the spring intake. The quality of their work quickly led to an evening out of quality in client assignments. Indeed, over a period it was noted that an additional learning dynamic was in operation, for clients observed that the average quality of assignments was rising.

It became apparent that a further cycle of learning was taking place as the overlapping intakes had begun to educate each other. What this meant was that the programme was no longer an annual cycle, but a rolling cycle of continuous reflection, action and improvement facilitated by the management team but driven to a significant degree by the activities of marketing advisors and the attendant culture of the programme.

This type of learning is organisational, in the sense that it takes place in an organisation but it is not organised like other learning. It is also action learning in that the marketing advisors recognised that their tasks were easier to manage and that there was a positive experience available to them in developing informal learning partnerships with new members of the group. This does not appear to have been the result of an active process of reflection on the part of any actor. Rather it should be characterised as action learning at its zenith, where individuals with a commitment to reflective practice, simply seek out the next logical step in the development of their own skills.

Managing organisational culture through facilitating learning between overlapping intakes
From a learning and educational perspective such processes are effective. However, risks do arise from an organisational point of view. The most
significant is the perpetuation of bad habits or negative cultural activities between groups. The worst-case result of these could be damage to the franchise for the type of commercial assignments that are undertaken. More likely is the emergence of conflict between different intakes and the loss of the types of learning opportunity discussed above.

In order to minimize these possibilities and to maximize the learning effect of the overlapping intakes, some organisational changes were implemented. The first step was to provide the four classroom courses that were also included as part of the programme to both groups simultaneously (all action learning consists of programmed learning like these courses and questioning insight developed from reflecting upon action, that is, P+Q). The presence of both groups in a class encouraged interaction between members on an equal basis. Such an egalitarian view was important given the inevitable perception of existing groups that new entrants are juniors. If all advisors are faced with similar tasks, the equality of each advisor is enhanced. However, those with longer tenure on the programme have additional expertise to offer in the classroom. The formal nature of lectures emphasises the situated nature of marketing knowledge, and rather than leading to resentment most often leads to respect and regard, as new advisors acknowledge the expertise of the existing cohort.

The second step in this process was to adopt a process of learning facilitation between groups. As discussed earlier, marketing advisors were each assigned to a learning set. Each of these is now assigned a learning facilitator from the previous intake to advise on the best pathways to learning. Typically, this involves the facilitator in explaining the details of action learning, their own experiences of such learning and advice on how a learning set could work to their best advantage. What this has done is to foster the interaction between intakes and direct that towards learning exchanges. Through direction on the content of the facilitation process, the emphasis has been placed on the positive aspects of previous experiences. At a minimum, these act as a counter weight to the possibility of negative messages.

In brief, these initiatives were the result of reflecting on past success, in this case the value of overlap, and looking for new opportunities to leverage the educational process. The value of such overlap between learning sets or project teams is a point rarely made in the action learning literature.

**Revealing the hidden curriculum through shadowing**

The concept of “a hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968; Giroux and Purpel, 1983; Eikeland, 2001) is a contentious one that suggests that educational effort often has features that the formal process of education affects beyond the consciousness of the recipient. For marketing advisors, this hidden or second curriculum is a positive and supportive one about their profession. When asked
about their learning, most marketing advisors will refer to what they have learned about the tacit knowledge of a marketing professional, like presentation skills, teamwork and ethical behaviour.

This learning has been revealed most successfully through the MDP shadow programme, in which an advisor follows a graduate over several days at the graduate’s workplace. Shadowing graduates of the programme for a period provides a window on how marketing actually takes place. The logic of shadowing graduates is that they would have an appreciation of the type of experiences that advisors need.

The value of this time is in revealing the hidden aspects of the advisors’ learning. For example, one advisor spent two days with an MDP graduate who was employed as a marketing manager with a leading service organisation. The advisor recounted how wonderful the first day had been, consisting as it did of meetings with clients and a creative agency. The second day was not as interesting, as it involved the advisor in observing that which he was already familiar with, dealing with customer problems, phoning suppliers and dealing with the administration of marketing effort. After reflection and discussion with one of the management team, it became clear to the advisor that what was apparently mundane was in fact the administration of marketing, and it was a significant proportion of the marketing task that he had developed considerable skill in through his enrolment in the MDP without being aware of it.

Orienting towards individual learning through an action learning dissertation

The MDP is a MSc degree and students must prepare a minor dissertation. Initially this was a standard piece of work involving literature review, hypotheses, data collection, data analysis and discussion. After a couple of dissertation cycles, it became obvious that this process was insufficient to stretch marketing advisors. They viewed the dissertation as a variation of a client assignment and generally failed to provide it with the type of reflective input required for effective learning.

In response to this issue, a revision has been made to the dissertation process to require students to complete an action-learning dissertation. Each student is required to take a particular learning episode, or a series of such episodes, and to explore and research what they have learned and how they have learned it. For example, marketing advisors have considered the roles that personal stress, inter-group conflict and difficult clients have played in enhancing or impeding their individual learning.

This process has yielded some exceptional action learning outcomes. First, from amongst the many learning experiences that marketing advisors had participated in, they were required to significantly reflect not on a single event but on the nature of their learning experience as a whole. For many advisors, the fact of their learning and its location in such a web of activity was initially a
cause of confusion and later a source of revelation. The second outcome was to reinforce the importance of a regular recording of learning experiences in the learning log, for this journal was the most reliable source of information for the action research project. Finally, the action learning dissertation acted to organise the programme around the concept of personal and professional development. The greatest significance of this activity is not in its originality, for many senior management programmes adopt similar dissertation formats, but in its ability to provide marketing advisors with a significant depth of reflection at an early stage in their careers.

Managing commercial tensions through segmentation by learning
Balancing the tension between the academic and commercial world is an area that requires significant ongoing reflection and action for the MDP. Such tension arises between the need to be commercially relevant and the imperative of always placing learning at the centre of programme activities. Given the nature of the programme, the need to put the personal and professional development of advisors at the core is not surprising. However, the MDP is also engaged in a significant amount of commercial activity. The demands of the clients for this work has the potential to distract the attention of the programme management and the marketing advisors themselves from their primary task of the professional and personal development of the marketing advisors involved.

A further element of this tension arises with the possible perception amongst clients that the programme merely offers marketing services more cheaply than other marketing agencies. In one way this could be viewed as a compliment, suggesting as it does the high level of professionalism attached to the work of MDP marketing advisors. The negative possibilities are more significant in their impact on the programme. First, the programme could attract clients whose only desire is for cheaper services. The problem with such clients is that they may “crowd out” other clients who may have assignments that are more valuable in terms of educational value. The second problem with cheap price seekers is that they often delay or attempt to avoid payment. Most significantly, such clients rarely offer the type of developmental guidance to students that an ideal client might.

The standard approach to dealing with these issues has been to avoid commercial promotion techniques for attracting clients, such as advertising or telemarketing, relying instead on word-of-mouth effects. As well, each client is informed of the objectives of the MDP and the role that they can play in the development of marketing advisors.

Despite these efforts, the commercial overlap is a pervasive one. To cope with this challenge, the programme has adopted two new principles for client management, segmentation by learning and an expanded service by advisors to clients. Segmentation of the MDP customer base has been a contentious
issue, primarily because of the desire to have a variety of types of clients and problems in order to maximise learning opportunities. A recent solution to this has been through segmentation by learning (Heavey, 2002).

As summarised in Table I, the ideal client assignment has a number of characteristics. The first is high client involvement and commitment, that is willingness on the part of the client to participate and facilitate the learning of marketing advisors. The second characteristic is that the project would be of high expected value to the client. This reinforces the previous issue of commitment but also suggests that marketing advisors may have useful opportunities to input directly into strategy development.

As well, younger firms are attractive clients because of the opportunity to have access to senior management within firms, a positive learning opportunity as such managers have historically shown a greater commitment to the objectives of the MDP and the personal development of marketing advisors. There is also the potential for an ongoing relationship with growing firms and the chance to participate in an instrumental fashion in that growth.

There are three management implications of such a segmentation framework. First, the number of clients that fall in the high learning segment can be used as an important measure of success in the absence of other devices. Second, it can provide a tool for the client management process, as those firms in the top segment require significant handling on a relationship development basis. Finally, it may assist in the process of allocation of assignments to marketing advisors. Students may expect to receive a number of assignments from each of the high and medium learning categories.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Market segment</th>
<th>Demographic/behavioural characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>High learning</td>
<td>High client involvement and commitment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High expected value</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High strategy</td>
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<td>Young/high growth companies</td>
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<td>SMEs/hi-tech</td>
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<td>Medium learning</td>
<td>High involvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Medium-low strategy</td>
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<td>Large companies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SMEs</td>
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<td>Low learning</td>
<td>Low involvement and commitment</td>
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<td>Low strategy</td>
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<td>High expected value</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Large companies/FMCG</td>
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<td>Standard research conducted annually</td>
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Table I.
Segmentation by learning

Source: Heavey (2002)
Managing commercial tensions through deeper involvement

Closely related to the previous initiative is the question of degree of involvement with clients. Some clients are willing to provide access to all aspects of their business and the decision making involved; others will provide no such support. From the marketing advisor perspective, there is a perceived need for more complete involvement with clients.

The solution is to adopt a more standardised approach to project management that will enhance the advisor experience and improve their learning experience and expertise. Essentially, we attempt to embrace what Coghlan and Brannick (2001) describe as actor-director role within the research process. This involves the marketing advisor in a more detailed initial consultation with the client. Ideally, this involves a three-four hour meeting with the client to discuss the nature of the task and the problems that face the client organisation. The benefits of this approach are that they get a deeper understanding of the needs of the client and their role in firm strategy. This is important, as it facilitates a stage in which advisors can understand the problem and their own learning opportunities. These opportunities can then be anticipated and actively managed by marketing advisors as they process through the assignment.

A final three-four hour meeting in which the marketing advisors present their results and strategic recommendations is then arranged. The outcome of such a meeting should be clear feedback from the client on their evaluation of the advisor’s efforts and the opportunity for marketing advisors to enjoy a greater appreciation of the role that their efforts play in strategic development. This enhances the role of the client as a participant in the action learning process.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to present a picture of a unique action learning approach to the development of new marketers. It has gone beyond similar papers (e.g. McGill and Beaty, 1992; Brulin, 2001) that have identified the existence of action learning programmes in other institutions to specifically identify the dynamics of such courses. It has drawn on the unique features of the MDP, its emphasis on pre-experience students, rolling intakes and the centrality of action learning, to identify the dynamics of the course. This picture leads to the identification of contributions to knowledge in three areas. Each is discussed below.

Action learning theory and practice

Most action learning literature implicitly deals with the post-experience context. This paper considers the challenges faced in offering such a course to pre-experience students. Practically, the problem with such an approach is that students have no experience to reflect upon. the MDP provides this experience through developing commercial relationships with a wide range of
organisations. It has also taken the next logical step in this process by adopting a segmentation by learning approach to client management.

The second contribution of this is to provide a template for a course dedicated to action learning. This article has gone beyond a simple description of a framework, as much of the literature does; rather it emphasises the dynamics of interaction between different actors in the execution and development of the course. This paper could be the first in a stream of case studies that demonstrates more clearly the progress and complexity of marketing education and development programmes. Such studies could provide more useful templates for the improvement of marketing education than statement of principles. Finally, this paper provides details of a series of proven innovations that could be adopted by any marketing programme and which have the potential to add value to the student learning experience.

Marketing education
The idea of revealing a hidden curriculum through the activities of the MDP marketing advisors activity offers an opportunity for marketing educators. Any educator who is involved in a programme such as the MDP would be immediately enthused and attracted by its powers of personal development and the enthusiasm that it generates among participants. This programme has essentially used textbooks to stand on, not lean against. Rather than the standardised package of service offered in most degree programmes, this programme offers an individualised and team-based approach that is actively adapted to facilitate the learning demands of the marketing advisors, who take complete responsibility for their own development.

Above all else, what this programme has demonstrated is that for students there can be no learning without action and for educators all action drives further learning. It is in the outcome of this process that the future of the MDP and perhaps marketing education as a whole lies.

References


