

# Teaching undergraduate marketing students using ‘Hot-Seating Through Puppetry’: an exploratory study

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Changes in preferred methods of learning among many students in recent years have challenged educators to introduce more interactive and experiential teaching methods. ‘Hot seating’- where a person, such as an invited subject expert is interviewed by an audience, is a well-established interactive method of learning, but is often limited by availability of willing and suitable interviewees. In this exploratory study, university business undergraduates were required to interact with a lecturer-operated puppet representing a corporate client interviewee in a simulated sales presentation. Reflective diaries were used to gain insights into students’ perceptions of this teaching technique. Results suggest that students: (i) gained practical business skills; (ii) were exposed to commercial responsibilities and; (iii) assimilated relevant academic theory. Benefits and limitations of ‘hot seating through puppetry’ and its possible contribution to teaching and learning in a variety of contexts are discussed, together with suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** Hot seating; Drama; Theatre; Puppets; Role play

## Introduction

Public and private sector organisations alike are today faced with a macro environment undergoing rapid, complex change. Such change requires flexibility from managers to meet emerging challenges and an ability to critically evaluate future opportunities. Marketing

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educators are also being challenged to meet the preferred learning styles of the new 'Millennial' generation of students (those born between 1982 and 2003; [Howe & Strauss, 2000]) for more interactive and experiential teaching techniques (Frontczak & Kelley, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), especially those that expose students to contemporary, applied management situations (Kessels & Kwakman, 2007; Wee, Alexandria, Kek & Kelley, 2003). Undergraduate marketing students tend to focus on the past strategies of firms and need to be challenged to think critically and creatively about how to create future customer value (Ackerman, Gross & Perner, 2003).

In response to such challenges, marketing educators in recent years have increasingly widened their range of teaching and learning techniques used beyond traditional written essays and exams, often taking advantage of opportunities from emerging technologies. Clearly, it is a case of 'no one size fits all' and each method has its own particular benefits and limitations. Examples of teaching methods commonly used in higher education business schools include:

*Case studies:* growing internet connectivity in classrooms has increased access to a wider range of case studies and facilitated writers' ability to more regularly update case content. Such cases are beneficial in that they expose students to real-world organisations and issues (Raju & Sanker, 1999) and can add extra interest and improved student motivation (Mustoe & Croft, 1999). Despite this, they still allow only limited interactivity between the case subject and students, as students cannot engage in real-time dialogue with case study organisations.

*Computer-based business simulations:* (e.g., The Business Strategy Game [GLO-BUS Software Inc., 2011]). Such games may be highly interactive and help development of students' analytical and creative decision-taking abilities within a controlled environment. Although availability of such games is increasing, they are however still relatively limited in numbers and types of scenarios available and depend critically on possession of the necessary computing and communications infrastructure.

*Reflective journals:* such journals can be either written and/or voice/video recorded. Reflective writing is a well-established technique in learning, stimulating introspection and self-development in students (Moon, 1999). The technique is beneficial in that it challenges students to engage with and search for meaning within their individual learning experience, not merely assimilate/reproduce content taught in class. It may also provide an outlet for students' possible frustration and concern with other aspects of the course, thus providing important feedback for the teacher. Some students however, find the concept of such reflection mysterious and sometimes have difficulties understanding and engaging with this technique (Spalding & Wilson, 2002).

*Hot Seating:* In this method, an interviewee, usually an invited 'expert' for example a corporate executive, is questioned by individual students or groups. The technique is highly interactive and offers rich learning opportunities (Neelands & Goode, 2005). Downsides however include: availability/burn out of guest speakers (especially if multiple classes of the taught unit are involved); participation may be affected by cultural influences (e.g., some students may be overawed by the guest's age and/or prestige) or; the educator may be unable to control dialogue to ensure communication of desired learning content.

### **Use of drama and puppetry in education**

*Drama:* educational drama may be defined as 'an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centred form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experiences' (Davis & Behm, 1978, p. 10). Categories of such drama include: (i) context building action – 'setting the scene' or adding information to a dramatic context; (ii) narrative action – telling a "story" or "what-happens-next"; (iii) poetic action – creating

symbolism; and (iv) reflective action – using “soliloquy” or “inner thinking” within dramatic context (Neelands & Goode, 2005). Educational drama has been widely used successfully in schools, within diverse subject disciplines, including sex education (Lloyd & Lyth, 2003), English as a second language (Demircioğlu, 2010), mathematics (Erdoğan & Baran, 2009) and the nature of science (Boujaoude, Sowwan & Adb-El\_Khalick, 2005). However, while educational drama by the teacher or trained actors can generate high levels of interaction and engagement with students (e.g., Boggs, Mickel & Holtom, 2007), some students may be hesitant to actually participate in active role play themselves, due either to personal shyness and/or cultural influences (authors’ obs.).

*Puppetry:* to date, most studies of puppetry in the educational literature have considered its use in schools, for example preschool pupils (Salmon & Sainato, 2005), middle school students (Mehrotra, Khunyakari, Natarajan & Chunawala, 2009) and students with special needs (Caputo, 1993). Although puppetry has a long history in entertainment in many countries (e.g., Bottoni et al., 2008; V&A undated), it has also more recently been successfully used as a community education tool for addressing serious social issues, for example education/prevention programs for HIV AIDS, prison rape and domestic violence (Freidman, 2005). Despite writings on puppetry in education by drama by authors such as O’Toole and Dunn (2002) however, a review of existing literature reveals a paucity of studies concerning puppetry’s application in higher education, especially in business contexts. Two rare examples include Pearce (2005) and Pearce and Braithwaite (2008) who document the use of student-operated puppetry as a means of facilitating active learning in teaching marketing of services at an Australian university. Similarly, whilst the abovementioned technique of ‘hot-seating’ is a commonly cited technique in applied theatre literature, no articles are apparent concerning the use of a puppet as an alternative to a conventional actor or guest speaker in a higher education business discipline.

Puppetry can be utilised for a variety of classroom purposes, including providing mystery, humour and tangibility (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002) and rising above the ordinary, the uninteresting and the fearful (Sinclair, 2000). Like business simulations/games, puppetry offers a more interactive alternative to a traditional lecture, which at its worst may be simply 'a means of transferring information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student without passing through the brain of either' (Anonymous). Questioning the value of passive reception and instead advocating learning through fun and games, Leigh and Kinder (1999, p .1) assert: '...many people do not find it easy to learn from hearing information, but prefer to learn through involvement and active engagement of their senses'. Puppetry is one way of potentially making learning memorable, attracting attention and stimulating engagement among people who might otherwise ignore the same material presented in another fashion (Sinclair, 2000).

As a pedagogical instrument, puppetry offers an ability to creatively project feelings and thoughts onto others (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002). It can facilitate the bridging of cultural, religious, linguistic, social or racial barriers (Freidman, 2005), potentially enabling things to be said that might not be acceptable when said by human actors (UNICEF, 1996) and has a unique ability to connect with all manner of people at a childlike level (Sinclair, 2000). The use of puppetry in education offers students a range of opportunities limited only by participants' imagination. Examples include: taking decisions, exploring experiences, interacting with others, learning from role play, self-discovery, specific skills, manipulating an environment and handling materials (Sinclair, 2000). Such learning through puppetry is informed by theory from a number of fields, including experiential learning through play (Belanger & van Slyke, 2000; Bruner 1972) and interactive drama in education (Boggs et al. 2007; Jackson 1999).

This paper illustrates the fusion of two educational drama activities – 'Hot Seating' through 'Puppetry' (HSTP), to promote engagement among millennial business students at an

Australian university. It describes how HSTP was incorporated into an undergraduate marketing unit that challenged students to explore contemporary marketing issues, including controversial products, ethics and 'pink marketing'.

HSTP was one of approximately 20 drama conventions used in the unit, which employed improvised drama as the dominant pedagogical approach. Other drama conventions used included Still Imaging, Forum Theatre and Mimed Activity. Educational goals of using HSTP were to: (1) facilitate safe simulation of experiences and situations from which students could create personal meaning and (2) allow students to apply marketing theory relevant to a specific market opportunity in an interactive way.

This paper will (i) analyse students' gained learning insights; (ii) discuss HSTP's benefits and limitations as an educational technique and; (iii) suggest directions and priorities for future research.

## **Method**

Fifty-one final year undergraduate students enrolled in a marketing unit that included eight weekly, three-hour drama workshops, taught over a single semester. HSTP, an activity designed by the senior author, was conducted in the penultimate drama workshop. The HSTP workshop ran for 25 minutes and comprised three stages:

1. *Preparation.* In this first stage, the students were given a short case study to read about a firm. The firm in the case was seeking to evaluate and appoint a consultancy to design an island resort on its behalf that would focus on the 'pink market', i.e. gay and lesbian consumers. After reading the case, students were randomly allocated into 'consultancy

teams' of five members which were then allowed further time to discuss the case together. Teams were then told they had been invited to meet the CEO of the client firm in the case – Mr Marcus Beare. Students were informed this person would be represented by a soft puppet. Teams were briefed that their objectives in meeting with Mr. Beare were (i) to seek further information regarding the island resort project and (ii) to promote their consultancy as the best-qualified to be awarded the design contract. Students were not told what they were specifically expected to learn during the drama; instead it was left to them to form their own expectations and goals. The lecturer prepared for the activity by learning rudimentary puppet manipulation - e.g. how to create the illusion of life, synchronisation of words with puppet mouth movement, through internet sources, books and private rehearsal. No professional training was undertaken.

2. *Implementation.* The second stage of the exercise involved all the student teams and lecturer together, acting out the meeting with Mr. Beare. The puppet was a 'plush puppet', selected from a wide range of puppets manufactured by Folkmanis ([www.Folkmanis.com](http://www.Folkmanis.com)). The puppet was seated on a chair in front of the student teams and was manipulated by the lecturer (senior author), crouched behind the chair, using his hand to operate the puppet's mouth (Figure 1). While the lecturer adopted an accent, he did not use ventriloquism. Individual team members asked both rehearsed and spontaneous questions of Mr. Beare which they thought would be useful in enhancing the credibility of their consultancy in his eyes and increase their chance of winning the deal. Although the lecturer used a basic 'mental script of issues to cover', responses to students' questions were largely improvisational, since the puppet reacted to and answered questions created 'on the spot' by the students acting in- role.

3. *Reflection.* Following the meeting, all teams and the lecturer together discussed their perceptions of the interview with Mr. Beare. They verbally reflected on lessons learned, including their performance as individuals and teams; expectations vs outcomes, and Mr. Beare's behaviour.

On completion of the unit at the end of the semester, students were asked to choose one of the eight drama workshops they had participated in and to write a reflective diary on their chosen workshop. This reflective diary was one of three compulsory assignments in the unit and was worth 50% of total unit marks. The other two pieces of assessment – one, a team debate and two, an individual research paper on a contemporary marketing topic (prepared in the form of a *Marketing* magazine style article – carried assessment weightings of 20% and 30% respectively. In the diary, students were asked to reflect and comment on four specific questions regarding their chosen drama workshop: (1) What did I learn? (2) How did I learn through drama? (3) How did I feel in-role? and (4) How did I feel this method compared with conventional teaching approaches?

Using thematic analysis, a method widely used in qualitative research for analysing unstructured, open-ended survey responses (Rice & Ezzy, 1999), students' verbatim responses to the four specific questions were sorted into themes and the number of comments recorded against each to ascertain their salience and relative importance.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

## **Results**



18 of the 51 (35%) students enrolled in the unit chose to submit a reflective diary on the HSTP drama workshop. Respondents' diaries were anonymously and randomly labelled as HSTP 1-18.

1. *What did I learn?*

Twelve themes were identified in three groups (Table 1). Acquisition of 'specific marketing theory/market/knowledge' (1.1) was substantially the most salient single theme (25 comments). The second most salient group (39 comments in three themes: 1.2 – 1.4) concerned students' learning of how to prepare for prior to, and conduct themselves during, a business meeting. Eight individual themes in the third group (points 1.5 – 1.12) each had substantially low salience and covered a diverse range of comments, mostly concerning person- or situation-specific knowledge gained.

2. *How did I learn?*

Eight themes were identified, with a steep gradient from most to least salient, spread across three groups (Table 1). A feeling of being '...immersed in a real-life situation with real responsibilities and consequences' (2.1), was substantially the most salient individual theme (32 comments). The second theme (2.2; 19 comments) 'taught me how and why to project myself/behave professionally in a business setting' also related to the specific situation. A third group (2.3 – 2.8) comprised themes of substantially lower importance, for example exposure to different perspectives, taking responsibility for self-learning, 'thinking outside the box' and applying theory in an enjoyable manner.

3. *How did I feel in-role?*

Eight themes were identified, with a steep gradient from most to least salient, spread across five groups (Table 1). These groups related to (i) the student's personal feelings; (ii) the client's behaviour; (iii) other teams' behaviour; (iv) team colleagues' behaviour and (v) overall immersion in the drama. Individual students clearly experienced strong and varying emotions, both negative and positive, during their participation in the exercise. While positive personal emotion of confidence/professionalism/competitiveness (3.1) was the most salient single theme (34 comments), negative personal emotion of nervousness/pressure/lack of confidence (3.2) was second most salient (25 comments). This suggests that students felt both positively challenged and intimidated by the experience. Overall, negative emotions across the five theme groups (3.2, 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6: 46 comments) outnumbered positive emotions (3.1, 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9: 38 comments).

4. *How did I feel this method compared with conventional teaching approaches?*

Ten themes were identified with a shallow gradient of salience and no clear grouping (Table 1). The most-salient theme (4.1) 'opportunity to actually participate in/learn about/rehearse/adapt in a real business meeting' had the lowest salience of any of the four question group results. Keywords such as 'participate', 'adapt', 'doing', 'applying', 'challenged', 'stimulated' however, suggest a high degree of interaction by students with the exercise. Specific, unprompted mention of the uniqueness of the puppet used (4.3: 10 comments), as opposed to other forms of drama used in other workshops of the unit, had third highest salience.

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## **Discussion**

Expectations of millennial students for more interactive methods of learning are challenging university educators to employ a wider range of teaching methods in the classroom than ever before, on the basis that no single method is best. Rather, it is more a case of ‘horses for courses’; blending and using complementary teaching techniques to illustrate all aspects of a complex subject such as marketing.

The study’s finding that students felt they had acquired specific marketing theory/knowledge from the exercise (i.e. the importance of market segmentation and product development based on analysis of consumer needs, for example the gay/lesbian ‘pink’ market) demonstrated HSTP’s ability to deliver a core learning outcome; that is, communication of target subject content.

Results showed that students learned the need for pre-meeting preparation and correct business meeting etiquette. This demonstrates the technique’s ability to deliver situation-specific skills. Findings also suggest that HSTP, by allowing students to become immersed in role play, helps them become aware of their responsibilities as decision makers within a team in an interactive and innovative manner.

The complex and conflicting responses to the question ‘how did I feel in-role?’ suggests that students were not merely participating superficially in the exercise but were instead deeply engaged on a personal level. Themes and comments recorded clearly demonstrate the technique’s ability to challenge students and shift them out of their ‘comfort zone’, requiring them to reflect critically on their own and other participants’ behaviour.

As noted, 35% of students enrolled in the unit chose to reflect on the HSTP workshop. This was the most popular choice of the eight drama workshops used in the unit. Despite the abovementioned personal challenge and psychological discomfort experienced by some individuals, students appear to have generally engaged with and enjoyed the novel aspects of the HSTP technique.

'Hot seating' using human guest speakers is acknowledged and widely used as an effective teaching technique that offers many benefits. It is still limited in some important aspects however, the most important being reliance on a continuous supply of qualified, willing guest speakers to cover a diverse range of teaching scenarios. Along with additional workload imposed on educators involved in identifying, liaising with and organising campus visits by various guest speakers, there is a real risk of 'burn out' among such speakers if they are in high demand. In addition, human guest speakers may be too polite/impolite to students, cannot be controlled by the educator and may even speak 'off brief' as a result of a personal/organisational own agenda.

To address such problems HSTP offers some unique potential benefits:

- (i) it gives educators an ability to create or use a wide range of new puppet 'characters' relevant to contemporary issues or events. For example, the senior author currently has a puppet 'troupe' of 13 different characters that are available for classroom visits. These characters include a recalcitrant baby, a slow thinking local government official, a bombastic crocodile, a curious alien and an overly studious teenager. Possible scenarios among a potentially infinite number where such characters might be used in marketing education include: health services/contraception products; not-for-profit emergency services; ecotourism; sporting products and sponsorship;

- (ii) it does not suffer from guest speaker burnout and/or unavailability and;
- (iii) it saves on resources – for example, time and/or energy spent sourcing, briefing and managing guest speakers.
- (iv) it enables students to be challenged by unfamiliar yet realistic issues.

Results from this study suggest that students felt immersed in the exercise and interacted with the puppet as if it were a real person. Puppet ‘characters’ are, however, detached from the lecturer’s persona, adding a unique teaching dimension that is flexible yet controllable.

HSTP, like any technique, also has limitations however. Perhaps the most obvious is a natural reluctance among educators to attempt something for which they lack formal training. As noted however, ventriloquism was not used in the current study and is not necessary for successful use of HSTP. Rudimentary puppetry skills, for example using a ‘soft puppet’ by which the lecturer operates the puppet’s head and mouth via his/her hand, are relatively easily acquired. The authors cannot do more here than suggest that educators interested in this technique have a little practice at home and then ‘give it a go’.

Puppetry is slowly becoming acknowledged in higher education, both as a teaching technique and as a subject of academic study (THEA, 2006). The first Chair in puppetry was probably established in 1952 at the Academy of Art in Prague, the Czech Republic. Dedicated puppetry programmes have since been established at a small number of British and American universities, although it is still debated whether puppetry skills are best learned at university or as part of a vocation. Puppetry is also taught as an element of many different disciplines, for example Computer Visualisation and Animation and various aspects of Performing Arts (THEA, 2006). Digital puppets as ‘avatars’ in new, computer-based technologies with ‘virtual reality’ attributes are also increasingly used in online game environments. Continuing developments in such technology, allowing audience members to interact with puppets by

gestures and voice potentially offer rich opportunities to expand the use of puppetry in education and other fields (Bottoni et al., 2008).

A comprehensive literature review for this article failed to reveal use of HSTP in business subjects in higher education institutions. This exploratory study therefore serves as a starting point for understanding business students' perceptions of learning through an innovative form of hot seating; one that incorporates puppetry. The technique might be profitably extended into teaching business disciplines other than marketing, for example, accounting or human resources management. It may also be useful in other business education contexts outside universities, for example corporate training (e.g., of 'front – line' customer-facing employees or senior executives responsible for press briefings).

### **Concluding remarks**

It is acknowledged that the current study is limited in that it comprised only a relatively small number of respondents, all from a peer group of final year marketing undergraduates. A second limitation was inherent in the analytical technique of thematic analysis, which although offering the benefit of not imposing any preconceived limit on respondents' answers, inevitably involves some degree of researcher subjectivity in identifying themes and allocating answers to them. Future research might therefore involve larger samples of respondents, perhaps comparing learning outcomes among students participating in the same study project exposed to HSTP vs non-HSTP teaching techniques and/or combined with quantitative analysis of responses against those themes identified in the current study. Further useful insights might also be gained from researching the perceptions of HSTP among students by (i) age (e.g.,

undergraduates vs mature postgraduates), (ii) gender and (iii) cultural background (especially individual- vs group- based cultures) to see where the technique is most effective.

### Notes on contributors

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