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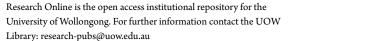
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A Developmental Approach to Teaching Internet Marketing

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Abstract

Just as buying and selling over the Internet represents a new frontier for commerce, teaching students how to best use the Internet in marketing presents educators with new challenges and new opportunities. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Internet commerce that must be confronted by educators is the general absence of inter-personal communication in customer exchanges. As most Internet marketing takes place using a self-service technology (SST) that enables customers to consume products independent of direct service employee involvement (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree and Bitner 2000), it seems inappropriate to teach marketing in an Internet environment by relying on traditional lecture-tutorial methods, even with the augmentation of a supporting website that offers chat rooms, teaching materials and other resources offered by electronic learning systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. This paper describes the use of an online role-play designed to provide students with experiential learning by using Internet technologies. The findings of this study suggest that incorporating an online role-play component enables students to apply theoretical applications in 'real world' situations.

Keywords

internet, marketing, role play, learning system, experiential learning

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A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO TEACHING INTERNET MARKETING

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Track: Online Marketing

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Just as buying and selling over the Internet represents a new frontier for commerce, teaching students how to best use the Internet in marketing presents educators with new challenges and new opportunities. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Internet commerce that must be confronted by educators is the general absence of inter-personal communication in customer exchanges. As most Internet marketing takes place using a self-service technology (SST) that enables customers to consume products independent of direct service employee involvement (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree and Bitner 2000), it seems inappropriate to teach marketing in an Internet environment by relying on traditional lecture-tutorial methods, even with the augmentation of a supporting website that offers chat rooms, teaching materials and other resources offered by electronic learning systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. This paper describes the use of an online role-play designed to provide students with experiential learning by using Internet technologies. The findings of this study suggest that incorporating an online role-play component enables students to apply theoretical applications in 'real world' situations.

Introduction

Changing teaching practices should be driven by educational objectives rather than technological desires (Freeman and Capper 1999). If Internet marketing educators practice what they preach, they should employ Internet platforms to provide non-traditional learning scenarios that enable students to acquire a more complete or holistic understanding of Internet commerce. Web-based learning environments can lead to a shift in students more actively participating in the construction of knowledge and learning (Sweeney and Ingram 2001). Appropriate Internet learning can enhance student learning, better prepare students to make effective use of technology in their post-education workplace and enable educators to be more productive (Chong 1997; Freeman and Capper 1999). As interactivity is a teaching tool commonly thought to improve learning outcomes (cf. Hamer 2000; Jonassen 2000), this paper argues that the pedagogy for Internet marketing can be improved by applying Internet technology to provide students with interactive technology based experiential learning opportunities. This means moving past the objective of making students "technocompenent" (e.g. Smart, Tomkovick, Jones and Menon 1999) into a world where students can interact and practice the lessons learnt. This paper investigates online role-plays as an educational tool to facilitate experiential learning to gain insights into the actual dynamics of Internet commerce.

Experiential and Technological Learning Using Role-plays

Feinstein, Mann and Corsun (2002) discuss experiential learning as a participatory method of learning utilising a variety of mental capabilities when a learner participates in an active and

immersive learning environment. Experimental learning outcomes can be measured which show an increased capacity to evoke higher order cognitive abilities in areas such as problem solving and judgement (Feinstein 2001). Experiential learning involves meta-processes that require the learner to apply knowledge and principles to new situations.

There is strong support for the benefits customised learning. For example, Prensky (2003) argues for the success of the tutorial as the better teaching model rather than the mass lecture, citing data that claim a tutored student's achievement is better than 98 per cent of classroom students; that the average time between questions for individuals in a classroom is 10 hours while interaction drops to near zero. In making use of a moderated online role-play; we are approaching the one-on-one tutorial model. Moderation is constantly available and there are a high levels and frequencies of interaction. This requires students to make decisions and seeing the consequences; allowing for reflection on actions; and providing time for learners to compose their thoughts and contribute in a considered manner. The other advantages on online role-plays identified by Ip and Linser (2001) are that weaker students who participate tend to understand the material better than weaker students who do not and that the moderator/teacher can intervene if necessary to pose specific questions that clarify whether a learner understands the material.

A study by Bell (2001) concluded that online role plays can fulfil a valuable educational function but may not have the key advantage of face-to-face role play – the possibility of significant empathy through role engagement. However, online role-plays may have an advantage over face-to-face role play in that the online environment enables role players to be actively involved in an emotionally safer and lower-risk learning activity. Further, Freeman and Capper (1998) found that indicators of deep learning were found in the interviews. Students came to understand the complex pressures at work on regulators and market participants. They had to deal with pressures of time and public reaction as well as learning to represent complex organisations in unfamiliar scenarios. They achieved a deeper understanding of their own views and those of others, as well as the limitations of the two main paradigms in practical contexts.

While traditional role-plays have been used extensively in education (Chesler and Fox 1966), they have been accused of suffering from a lack of reality in areas such as risk consequences (e.g. financial transactions) and relationships (e.g. vendors, customers) (Daly 2001). According to Freeman and Capper (1999), the Internet offers several possibilities for the improvement over face-to-face role plays such as anonymity and asynchronicity (that allows students time to reflect on their role in a time that suits them).

For a course on Internet marketing, a role-play in a virtual world can provide students with a unique experiential learning opportunity – actually going out into an electronic environment to dynamically interact to buy, sell, negotiate, lobby, and market products. Natesan and Smith (1998) list skills such as mass communications, search and retrieval, problem solving and promotion as the key skills required in Internet marketing.

Description of the Online Role-Play

Students enrolled in a postgraduate Internet Marketing subject at the University of Wollongong undertook an online role-play as a component of their assessment. The role-play was designed to provide students with an experiential understanding of the dynamic world of electronic marketing. The aim of the role-play was to emphasise that marketing is a complex process within organizations that can impact on a diverse range of stakeholders in the

community. In particular, the role-play sought to increase the students' understanding of the Internet as a dynamic tool of communication, the different perceptions and functions of Internet business models (particularly new practices made possible by new technologies) and the marketing strategies that consider the interaction and responses of a wide group of people, and in this case not just customers buying the student's products. The evolution of the role-play scenario also made it possible to explore the dynamic function of marketing theory from different stakeholder perspectives (e.g. marketing manager, light and heavy customers, lobby groups, shareholders) and to identify the legal and ethical issues associated with Internet marketing, and the particularly popular gambling product category.

The role-play consisted of six different characters. Generally, two students formed a character-team. Each student was required to nominate for three characters, which were allocated on a first-come first-served basis (it was not possible for students to pick their playing partners). At the request of students, the second team member became known as "the dark side." Students were expected to "become" the character that they selected, and work with their "dark side" to make decisions as though they were that character. To ensure students were able to freely act as their character, students were not permitted to reveal their character identity to any person other than their "dark-side." By virtue of class size, three different worlds were run concurrently. The role-play software provided a range of communication options for real time and asynchronous communications for team members to discuss issues during the simulation, these discussions were also designed to be "self contained."

Each week the characters were provided with tasks that related to Internet marketing. Each team had one week to complete each task assigned and completing the assigned tasks was a prerequisite for the full interaction of the student's virtual world. Students were encouraged to research and contemplate the issue placed before their character, and then interact with their "darkside", and their world. Students were encouraged to use their knowledge of marketing theory to make the best possible suggestions for their character. Since a high proportion of the students were from non-English speaking backgrounds, the asynchronous nature of the role-play facilitated their involvement in the simulation. Consistent with Daly's (2001) description of the instructor or lecturer in his online business teaching method, the role of the instructor in the role-play was one of a facilitator characterized by little intervention.

Results

At the completion of the course, students were invited to respond to an online survey to allow researchers to gather data on the students experience with the online role-play as a teaching tool. This formed the basis for the preliminary study presented. The findings indicate that an online role-play presented students with a challenging learning paradigm. The online role-play component of the course provided students with a forum to discuss theoretical propositions in terms of practical decisions made during the simulation. Respondents recommended greater focus on theory development earlier in the semester to further enhance the learning experience during the simulation.

Respondents found that the strength of the online role-play was to bring tight communication with other class members, and at the same time allow innovative marketing concepts to be applied by the characters in the role-play. The surprise events during the simulation provided students with the opportunity to assess how they would react to specific challenging events, and measure outcomes from actions taken. This experience was seen as a major benefit of the simulation.

Respondents claimed that the main weakness of the simulation was the technology supporting the online role-play. Many respondents found the lack of functionality frustrating and these technological problems encountered diminished the effectiveness of the online role-play as teaching tool. The findings indicate that the technology which supported the initial online role-play would require further development, as 64 percent of participants found that the technology did not function properly, while 84 percent found the website difficult to navigate, and 56 percent found the website difficult to use.

The responses to the open-ended questions posed to respondents focus on ways to improve the technology used to host the simulation. These include: improved channels of communication with team members, increased interaction between members, and greater exchange of ideas would enhance the experience. The terms of how this component of the course's assessment impacted on the student in terms of time spent on the simulation and this relationship with the marks allocated to the online role-play, the results indicate the weighting for this component should be increased. The majority of respondents (68 percent) spent between up to five hours a week undertaking the tasks assigned, while 28 percent spent more than six hours and more each week. Most believed that the assessment component allocated for the role-play was not adequate for the time required to meet requirements.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this preliminary study found that online role-play simulation facilitated student interaction and learning in this technological sphere. Through the employment of this simulation, the survey results indicate that the non-traditional learning scenario facilitated the students' acquisition of a more complete or holistic understanding of Internet commerce. The results from this preliminary study indicate that the online role-play enhanced student learning and encouraged students to make more effective use of the technology. Interactivity is a teaching tool commonly thought to improve learning outcomes, the results of this preliminary study indicate that the pedagogy for Internet marketing can be improved by applying Internet technology to provide students with interactive technology based experiential learning opportunities. Further, development of the technology is needed to enhance this tool and enable the full potential of this useful learning activity to be achieved. Further research is needed to better develop the technology to support this innovative teaching tool, and enhance the simulation to provide a strong platform for student interaction and learning in the Internet Marketing paradigm.

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