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Students' perception of the flipped classroom:

Teaching Consumer Behavior and Market Research classes in two Swiss Universities

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ABSTRACT

Marketing instructors have traditionally sought to use experiential and active learning methods in their teaching. The flipped classroom is a learner-centered innovative pedagogical approach that moves the delivery of class material outside the classroom to focus on collaborative activities during class sessions. This qualitative exploratory research aims at understanding how students perceive their experience and the outcome of flipped classroom marketing courses in two Swiss universities. The analysis shows mixed results depending on the student population involved, as well as on the format of the preparatory material provided.

Keywords Flipped Classroom, Inverted classroom, Consumer Behavior, Market Research, Marketing

INTRODUCTION

A research conducted on 107 marketing faculty (Smart et al, 1999) found out that they aim at attaining the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, 1956), placing a greater emphasis on how students can apply the taught content and develop competencies, such as problem solving, that are required by prospective employers. A review of all articles published in the Journal of Marketing Education between its creation in 1979 and 2012 showed that "experiential learning" had the second greatest number and percentage of articles published, right after "assessment" (Gray et al, 2012). Gray et al. (2012) describe experiential learning as "*a cornerstone of marketing education and a signature pedagogy for the discipline*".

Modern technology enables a type of experiential active learning model known as "flipped classroom", first introduced by Baker, 2000, and Lage et al., 2000, and popularized through online videos and activities by, among others, Karl Fisch, Jon Bergmann and the Khan Academy (Butt, 2014)

This research aims at understanding how the flipped classroom mechanism can affect students' perceived experience and perceived outcomes through a qualitative exploratory research conducted in 7 classes of Consumer Behavior and Market Research in 2 Swiss Universities in spring 2016.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Flipped classrooms are about moving the “delivery” of material outside of formal class time (through the use of extensive notes, video recorded lectures, book chapters and other appropriate means) and using formal class time for students to undertake collaborative and interactive activities relevant to that material, such as problem-solving, case studies, exercises, examples, etc., (Butt, 2014). Traditionally, a quiz is performed at the beginning of the class time to assess if students have done their preparatory work. Indeed, a research conducted by Smart et al (1999) showed that among the changes perceived by faculty over the previous ten years, was the fact that students seemed to have a general unwillingness to read assigned materials. Thus many students need to be motivated to read their textbook and do their homework (Frydenberg, 2012).

Research across various fields (Bishop & Verleger, 2013) finds that students provide mixed feedback on flipped classrooms. Lage (2000), Gannod et al (2008) and Bates & Galloway (2012) report mostly positive feedback, Schullery et al (2011) and Findlay-Thompson & Mombourquette (2014) report a mix of positive and negative feedback, whereas Strayer (2012) and Jaster (2013) report mostly negative feedback. Findlay-Thompson & Mombourquette (2014) conclude that flipped classroom models might be only effective with specific student populations. Usually, students complain about workload and highlight the importance of clear guidelines and the need to be well organized to succeed in a flipped classroom (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

One of the pitfalls of flipped classrooms is that students must overcome their reliance on traditional classroom teaching and be willing to accept the responsibility for self-learning that comes with a flipped class (Techsmith, 2013; Knewton, 2013). However, Goodwin and Miller (2011) surveyed 453 instructors who flipped their classrooms and identified 5 benefits of flipped classrooms: Improved student-teacher interaction, Opportunity for real-time feedback, Student engagement, Self-paced

learning and More meaningful homework. Teachers, nonetheless, express concerns regarding the time commitment and the workload to set up, implement and manage a flipped classroom (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

Although flipped classroom teaching methods have been somewhat researched, very few research has been done in business education (Schullery et al, 2011; Findlay-Thompson & Mombourquette, 2014) and we were not able to find any research on students' assessment of flipped classrooms in teaching marketing,

METHODOLOGY

Student data was collected from seven part-time and full-time undergraduate marketing research classes taught by three different teachers in two different schools in Spring 2016.

Instead of the traditional quiz performed at the beginning of each session, a different approach was chosen, to overcome the risk of students' lack of preparation (Smart et al, 1999; Fox, 2016): In one school (4 classes), powerpoint slides were provided to the students by the instructor and each week, one group of student was required to present a summary of the course material at the beginning of the class. In the other school (3 classes), 2 books were used as a basis for the course: Malhotra (2014) and Solomon (2013). Each week, 2 groups of students were required to summarize, at the beginning of the class, a 25 to 40 pages book chapter assigned to each. The best summaries from the 3 classes were made available (slides and speakers' notes) to the students, after the session, on the online platform. In all 7 classes, instructors provided feedback on the summaries presented, introduced additional or missing content as well as added many examples. For the second half of the class session, interactive exercises were done in groups. In addition, all classes did a market research project, for a real client.

Data was collected through standardized surveys used by schools to assess classes in an ISO Quality approach. Therefore, two different questionnaires, depending on schools, were distributed. However, both surveys included open-ended questions about strong and weak points. Students completed the questionnaires anonymously and online, so, we do not have any demographics about the students.

Additionally, one of the instructors asked the students (2 classes) to make up to 3 recommendations to improve the teaching. Sources were categorized according to table 1, below:

Table 1: Categorization of sources

	Class	Number of respondents	Full time (FT) or part-time (PT)	School	Preparatory material provided	Survey method
Source 1	A	21	FT	Geneva	Textbooks	Standardized questionnaire
Source 2	B	15	FT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Standardized questionnaire
Source 3	C	14	FT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Standardized questionnaire
Source 4	D	17	PT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Standardized questionnaire
Source 5	E	21	PT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Standardized questionnaire
Source 6	F	21	PT	Geneva	Textbooks	Standardized questionnaire
Source 7	G	23	PT	Geneva	Textbooks	Standardized questionnaire
Source 8	D	23	PT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Recommendations
Source 9	E	27	PT	Fribourg	Instructor material	Recommendations

The research process followed different steps:

- We conducted a thorough literature review to determine the state of the art of research related to the use of the flipped classroom approach in general, and more specifically in marketing.
- Based on this literature review, we identified key issues to investigate.
- Schools sent questionnaires to students to assess the quality of teaching. A total of 154 students responded to a standardized quality-aimed questionnaires and/or to an open-ended question about recommendations for improvement.
- The collected data was analyzed using content analysis (with the help of Nvivo) based on codes and categories of codes from the literature review. We also counted the frequency of words to find out any additional relevant codes.
- We conducted a cross member validation to ensure higher reliability of our findings.

Open-ended questions were used, consistently with the exploratory nature of our study but we faced the difficulty that students sometimes provided very short comments that were difficult to interpret. In that case, comments were ignored when analyzing content.

As code categories (parent node in Nvivo), we retained the 4 characteristics identified by Crews & Butterfield (2014), i.e., class structure, interaction, instructor and material. Word count allowed us to add codes as child nodes and new parent nodes, such as learning outcomes or semester projects. The whole corpus was coded. Relevant parts were associated with one or several codes. All the code-related content was analyzed.

In the next section, we present the synthesis of the main results obtained from the students' comments.

RESULTS

Flipped classroom structure (92 codings)

Adopting a flipped classroom format for a whole semester (i.e. 16-week long, 3 hours per week) was considered by the respondents as overwhelming and a heavy burden when it comes to working independently. Students did not know how to prioritize the subjects and could not identify what were the main topics of the course. They needed more guidelines. They would have liked the instructor to highlight some subjects as more important than others.

Time was noted as an important issue (39 codings). Students had the impression that they did not have enough time to do everything that was requested. They had issues dealing with deadlines. Course pace was highly demanding. Especially, part-time students complained that it was difficult to organize group work and to reconcile school, family and work obligations.

"I don't like it, at all. This way of doing is burdensome. Too much additional work besides other classes. Not enough added value. I would prefer to have the instructor give a lecture. Information would be better and more complete." – A student from source 6

The structure of our approach was perceived as rather negative. Students, when talking about class structure, mostly gave negative feedbacks on the method and the way it was implemented (36 negative codings vs 14 positive). Respondents mentioned that it was too much to handle and they needed more inputs from teachers. They felt like they had to work extra hours, at home, besides coming to class. There was no difference in perceptions between full time and part time students. However, it seems that the format using textbooks rather than instructors' material was perceived more negatively (22 negative comments vs 6). Students did not like feeling compelled to read full chapters and having classmates present the theoretical concepts. They perceived that there was too much theory compared to practice.

"It implies a great deal of work. A lot of reading. On the top, it must be added to a considerable burden." – Source 6

As positive aspects, they noted that, thanks to this structure, rhythms, activities and topics were more diverse. They appreciated having time in class to work in groups on exercises or on the market research project. All this generated a higher level of interactivity.

Interaction (79 codings)

Students liked the mechanisms used for promoting interactions such as discussions, exercises, games or feedback. They did not see any difference between exercises and examples and considered them more or less as one category: a way to translate theory into practice. In reality, exercises are a way to put theory into practice whereas examples are representations of theory. Both were also perceived as a way to increase interactivity and discussions with instructors. Exercises and examples were nearly always mentioned in positive terms. They contribute to make the course interesting and to explain theoretical concepts more clearly. Students actually asked for a more intensive use of these mechanisms and for more variety.

Students also asked for more feedback from the instructors. Teachers should clearly state what is right or wrong when students answer questions or present concepts or market research findings.

In summary, the more interaction, the better.

Instructors (55 codings)

Most of the codings (35 codings) related to instructors, questioned their engagement in teaching, or rather their lack of involvement. Students did not recognize the fact that, in-line with findings from the literature (Wanner & Palmer, 2015), flipped classrooms required more work from the instructors. On the contrary, they perceived that instructors worked less than in traditional teaching approaches, by “outsourcing” their tasks to the students.

“This method shifts the workload from the teacher to overcharge the students. The instructor does not bring anything. Summarizing textbooks is useless. We are able to read.” – A student from source 1

Students felt that they did not benefit from their instructors’ knowledge and experience. In the eyes of the students, a flipped classroom with no lecture means no course. Instructors cannot be replaced by textbooks, readings or by presentations made by classmates. Some of the students would prefer traditional lectures.

“We feel like everything has to be done by ourselves, on our side. It might be interesting but not all the time. Finally, we have to work ourselves at home, if we have some questions, then you can ask them. – A student from source 4

However, we have to nuance these findings. The system consisting of using textbooks and having students presenting a summary of some chapters was perceived more negatively by the students than doing it by using teachers’ material (24 codings vs 6).

Every cloud has silver linings ... In that case, as teachers, it is comforting to observe that the personal skills of instructors are highlighted and are very important. Teachers help students understand and learn what is important in the field of marketing.

*“I really appreciate the dynamism of the teacher. She makes you want to listen.”
– A student from source 5*

Material (54 codings)

Students appreciated to have access to instructors' slides and support online, before going to class. The material was extensive and complete. Some of them found that there was even too much material. They may have felt lost, especially when they had to prepare their exams.

"I'm a person who learns everything by heart. Unfortunately, learning 2 huge textbooks by heart is very hard." – A student from source 6

They did not like having to work on the basis of textbooks and to read long chapters. It might be a question of generation. Younger generations are less used to reading a lot. They also complained about the price of textbooks.

Student involvement (74 codings)

Students' opinions differed regarding their involvement. Some of them believed that the flipped classroom approach requires more implication and more proactivity from the students. They also felt that they were able to participate more actively in class. On the contrary, other students alleged they were less involved in their learning process and in class dynamics. As there was so much to do and so little time for doing it, they decided to give up as they felt it was impossible to do it. Or at least, they decided to perform poorly.

"Strong point of that class: it fosters implication." – A student from source 1

"This method takes far too long. So we sometimes produced a lousy job." – A student from source 6

Some students appreciated the flipped classroom method because they realized that most of the work was done throughout the semester. They did not have to review all the material and to learn it, to get prepared for the exams. However, it was still perceived as a constraint or a disruption in the traditional organization of their program. Some students may not feel comfortable as they don't know how to adapt their usual work methods to these new requirements.

"It allows us or forces us to review more and far earlier." – A student from source 6

However, a vast majority of students agreed on their assessment regarding the required workload (56 codings). It was too heavy, too much to do, too much to read, too many chapters from the textbooks, etc. Especially the system based on textbooks was considered as an excessive burden (38 codings for textbooks vs. 12 codings for instructors' material). Forcing students to work regularly and to get acquainted with theoretical concepts on their own was considered to be an extra work, not as a part of a whole. For them, it's more than workload, it's an overload (17 codings).

"This represents a large investment in time." – A student from source 5

Learning outcomes (134 codings)

Students provided feedback on the exercises and explanations that allow to identify problematic areas and to clarify misperceptions. The role of the professor in this method is to check whether the students have understood the concepts and whether they are able to apply them correctly. In class, the instructors used mechanisms, such as exercises and quizzes, to detect areas to be clarified. Students would have liked more "interventionist" professors. Some students, for instance, felt that they need to hear the theory in order to learn it. For them, a more traditional approach would have been more suitable.

Students asked for more simulations, hands-on exercises, case studies and concrete examples to put theory into practice. They expect professors to deepen their understanding and to give feedback about their understanding and their capabilities. The client-sponsored market research project was perceived as a very good way to combine theory and practice. Conducting a real market research with a real company was mentioned as a way to be specific and concrete.

"Working on a real mandate is great. So cool not to work for nothing." – Source 4

At the end of the day, students rated more positively (32 codings) than negatively (22 codings) the entire system. When they appreciated it, they found it very interesting, dynamic or riveting. Students liked all the positive features already mentioned, such as a combination of theory and practice, the role of the instructors, better understanding, a greater variety, etc.

"Nothing to complain. Just perfect." – Source 5

Students who disliked that approach found that it was not interesting and it brought no added value compared to the traditional teaching method. They disliked the idea of self-learning and having too much homework.

“I’m frustrated. The potential of this class is under-utilized. There is no chance to develop and enjoy.” – Source 1

However, we observed that this approach might better suit the expectations of part-time students (3 negative codings vs 16 positive codings) rather than those of full-time students (18 negative codings vs 9 positive codings). Appreciations of attractiveness or aversiveness change depending on the type of students.

DISCUSSION

This research revealed divergent attitudes regarding the way we applied the flipped classroom method. In-line with Finley-Thompson & Mombourquette (2014), it appeared that this approach is better suited for specific students’ populations, in our research the top and the part-time students. These students might prefer this approach as it allows a self-paced and steadier learning, for which they might be better prepared (techsmith, 2013; Knewton, 2013). The majority of students seems to have trouble to let go of the traditional approach they are used to and they consider this approach as an imposed and useless change which, in-line with Wanner & Palmer (2015) provides too much workload, requires clear guidelines and well organized students. Therefore, teachers should think of class structures and mechanisms that would enable to benefit from the advantages while addressing the drawbacks of flipped classrooms.

Teachers’ skills were highlighted. However, the hard work of teachers, mentioned in Wanner & Palmer (2015) was not recognized. On the contrary, students considered that there was no real work by the instructors. To address these shortcomings, this approach should be better explained to the students at the very beginning of the course, i.e. roles of each, involvement, objectives, etc. Instructors might also be more directive when setting the guidelines, otherwise students might feel lost and overwhelmed when dealing on their own with all the material. It is worth mentioning that students provided more positive

feedback when the preparatory material was a set of powerpoint slides provided by the instructor than when it was a set of assigned textbook chapters.

In-line with Goodwill & Miller (2013), students valued and wanted even more real-time feedback. For many, they found their engagement enhanced by this method. Yet, in contradiction to Goodwill & Miller (2013), few appeared prepared for this self-paced learning approach and rare were those who found that the preparatory homework was meaningful.

Further research should be conducted in a more structured and robust manner, for instance, by using a unique questionnaire for all the students. As our research showed mixed results, exploratory research based on semi-structured interviews might help to gain in-depth insight of motivations and inhibitors related to the flipped classroom approach. In particular, it would be interesting to know if students' assessment of flipped classroom is correlated to their prior experience with this method (or lack thereof) or their ability to learn on their own. Additional information as to the gender and age of students might also provide a better understanding on the types of students better suited for flipped classroom approaches in marketing teaching.

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