

THE PROJECT METHOD IN MARKETING EDUCATION*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theoretical and historical origins of project method teaching, especially as the method developed in the writings of early progressive educators John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick. The purpose of the paper is to raise questions—given the theoretical and historical background—about the method's application in marketing education today.

INTRODUCTION

The project method of education is the assignment of a purposeful activity that is intended to stimulate the student's wholehearted interest. One application of the use of projects to business education is the case method, originated and developed at the Harvard Business School.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the project method as it is used in marketing education. The method was developed in the early twentieth century by such pioneers of progressive education as John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick. At nearly the same time, the Harvard Business School was adapting the ideas of these progressives to business education. A staple of the marketing capstone course today, as well as of graduate marketing courses, is the Harvard-style case. A look at the theoretical and historical origins of case method instruction may cast new light on this old friend of professors.

THE PROJECT METHOD

It can be argued that Maria Montessori also advocated the project method of education, through her focus on concentrated attention and the significance she place on a prepared environment and the use of didactic materials (Montessori 1912, 1917; Nicholson 1979; and Kierstead 1981.) This paper, however, focuses only on ideas from the American past and of American educators.

Origins

The project method originated in vocational schools around the turn of the twentieth century as a supplement to regular methods of instruction. Its purpose was to provide real life application of principles already learned in the classroom. Thus, a typical project in an agricultural school might be to test new seed or to raise potatoes. The project was carried out in its real life setting outside of school (Thayer 1928, pp. 229-47). Extension of the original idea led to imitations of real life in the classroom, such as the construction of a model heating plant in a physics class.

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Observing the enthusiasm of students for these real life projects, teachers began to speculate on the value of developing the entire curriculum as a series of projects in place of the traditional lecture and recitation. Thus, a project to study a neighbor's sunflowers leads from initial observation of the plants to an examination of its cultivation, its relation to the soil and sunlight, and then to other plants in its surroundings. This inductive approach to teaching and learning—an idea that had been slowly evolving since the seventeenth century (Bowen, pp. 85-90)—gradually extends from the study of sunflowers to the study of botany and biology, where the principles of a subject matter are acquired first-hand through experience rather than second-hand from a book or teacher.

Theory

The theory behind the project method was articulated by philosopher John Dewey and one of his foremost interpreters William Heard Kilpatrick. Dewey argues that the purpose of education is to provide students with experiences that sustain and enhance their growth. (Dewey does not use the term “project.”) Experience, for Dewey, is a process, both active and passive. “When we experience something,” Dewey states, “we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return” (1916, p. 139). The result of this trying and undergoing is learning—learning from experience.

Intelligent learning, however, requires thought, which mere experience does not usually produce. Thinking “is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result” (p. 145). A student, for example, sets out to sell greeting cards door-to-door; after several frustrating tries, he discovers that the sunglasses he is wearing are a major deterrent to his success, because his prospects cannot see his eyes and therefore instantly distrust him. “Thinking is thus equivalent to an explicit rendering of the intelligent in our experience. It makes it possible to act with an end in view” (p. 146) or purpose. The purpose of the student is to actively determine what in his prospecting experiences will lead to successful selling.

This description of thinking, which Dewey viewed as a generalization of scientific method, is one of Dewey's original contributions to education and philosophy. It is better known today as “problem-solving thinking” and consists of five steps: the experience of a felt difficulty, the location and definition of the difficulty, the suggestion of a possible solution or hypothesis, exploration of the implications of the hypothesis, and further observation and experiment to test the validity of the suggested solution (Dewey 1910, p. 72). It is these steps that became the basic guidelines used to analyze Harvard-style cases, compressed usually to the three steps of problem, analysis, and solution. (Dewey's five steps also form the basis of the purchase decision process discussed in consumer behavior.)

Kilpatrick took Dewey's rather abstract discussion of experiences and thinking and made it more concretely accessible to the lay teacher by combining it with the developing techniques of project method. Kilpatrick generalized project method as a “wholehearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment” (1918). The term “wholehearted” means chosen, not coerced; thus the student's “whole heart” is put into the project. “Purposeful” means that the

activity is directed, not drifting or passive; when engaged in a wholehearted purposeful act, the student becomes master of his fate, not a slave or serf to chance. “Social environment” refers to the interpersonal nature of the classroom—and society. The project therefore may be a group experience, involving two or more students, but it need not, although Dewey and Kilpatrick tended to emphasize the significance of the social.

Kilpatrick (p. 16) describes four interrelated types of projects: (1) to make or do something (build a boat or present a play), (2) to enjoy something esthetic (listen to a story or appreciate a picture), (3) to solve a problem (discover whether or not dew falls or how New York outgrew Philadelphia), and (4) to acquire knowledge or a skill (learning the irregular verbs in French). As Kilpatrick himself points out, Dewey’s problem-solving thinking is a special case—type 3—of the more general purposeful activity delineated. It should be noted also that traditional learning is essentially type 4. At the risk of oversimplification, the four types of projects that can be assigned to students are those that require “doing,” “enjoying,” “solving,” and “acquiring.”

THE CASE METHOD

The use of cases in business courses entails projects of type 3, problem-solving thinking, and, if presentations are required, type 1. (Type 2, “enjoying,” is something that students seldom associate with case analysis and type 4—“acquiring”—only over their dead bodies!)

The case method originated at the Harvard Business School, which was founded in 1908 by Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, and Edwin Gay, Berlin-trained professor of economic history and first Dean of the Business School. From the start, Gay advocated what he called the problem or laboratory method of instruction, a technique he had observed in use in German universities, as opposed to the lecture and textbook method (Copeland 1958, pp. 3-29, 254-72). A lack of written cases, however, and faculty resistance to change delayed general practice of the case method until the 1920’s. During and after that period, the case method spread to business schools throughout the country.

At first, cases were little more than illustrations of principles or brief histories of a problematic situation that needed to be resolved; they often resembled what today would be a two- or three-paragraph essay question on an examination. Gradually, especially after World War II, cases blossomed into the elaborate imitations of real life situations familiar today (Christensen 1987, pp. 27-28). For many years, business case method was said to be analogous to the method used in law schools, especially Harvard Law (Donham 1931; Christensen 1987). The medical analogy, however, has seemed more appropriate: law cases present decisions already made and the student’s task is to analyze the reasoning behind the decisions, whereas business problems are complex experiences in which a diagnosis must be determined and analyzed before a “cure” can be recommended—not unlike the problems confronting medical doctors (Cabot 1931).

Consistent with Dewey and Kilpatrick, business case analysis is a project that provides purposeful activity in a social setting and simulates real life experience. Its focus is on action and the consequences of action. Analogous to real life business experience, case method enables “the individual to meet in action the problems arising out of new situations of an ever-changing environment. . . . [It consists] of acquiring facility to act in the presence of new experience”

(Dewey 1931, pp. 3-4). Paraphrasing Dewey, case method enables to student to render intelligent what is experienced and thereby to act purposefully to a conclusion. Applied to marketing, Borden (1931, p. 43) pointed out that case method “develops valuable habits of thought” for the person “going into the marketing field.”

MARKETING PROJECTS AND CASES

It is obvious that project method dominates marketing education, not just in the use of cases, but in the use of the multi-faceted phrase “the term project.” Designed to be purposeful activities, term projects are usually intended to give students some choice in the project pursued. The marketing research assignment to conduct a survey, analyze the data, and report the results is one of the more direct uses of project method. Experiential exercises is another use. Even the researched secondary data paper falls within Kilpatrick’s “doing” and “acquiring” types of projects.

What remains to be discussed is what can be learned about implementation and execution of project method, especially the use of cases, in present-day marketing education. A number of questions arise when comparing current practice to the original theory.

One question concerns the complete substitution of projects for standard curriculum and methods. This has not occurred in a sustained way at the primary and secondary levels of education, nor at the undergraduate level, except in certain courses like the marketing capstone course. The Harvard Business School, for the most part, has substituted cases for lectures and textbooks, but even this has not been sustained over the years. Any attempt to use cases exclusively inevitably produces the case instructor’s lament: “I have to give them some theory; they just can’t get it on their own.” Thus, “mini-lectures” apologetically creep into the case course.

The issue here is the old debate of content versus method. Entirely substituting cases for lectures and textbooks is to emphasize method over content, often at the expense and denigration of content. Cases can, of course, be used as illustrations and applications of principles already learned, which is the premise underlying the undergraduate capstone course. But even the way many capstone courses are taught—their implementation and execution—leaves much to be desired. The emphasis of many instructors rests heavily on the “felt difficulty” part of Dewey’s five-part thinking process; some instructors boast that their role is to encourage dissension among students and never to give an answer to the case or to say what happened. This approach to case discussion is excessively negative and fails to understand that the thinking process starts with a “felt difficulty,” but then methodically pushes onward to resolution.

In addition, this approach overlooks the necessity of subject matter with which to do the thinking—“subject matter” here means the principles of marketing, not the specific facts of a case. Dewey, contrary to the way he has been remembered, is not an opponent of subject matter, or a proponent of method over content. Method, he says, is the ordering of subject matter for its most effective use. “Never is method something outside of the material” (1916, p. 165). He refers to knowledge or information as the necessary “working capital” with which thinking conducts its business (p. 158). “The problem of teaching is to keep the experience of the student

moving in the direction of what the expert already knows” (p. 184). Dewey, indeed, in one of his last writings on education, was highly critical of his progressive colleagues who were “contemptuous of the organization of facts and ideas” (1938, p. 82).

A number of implications follow from Dewey’s view of subject matter and method. One is that both case writers and instructors should emphasize the principles that are illustrated in the case or that can be induced or summed up from the discussion of the case. Writers of casebooks do tend to organize their cases according to the main topics of marketing—consumer behavior, product strategy, etc.—but it is not always obvious that the principles from that topic apply in the case; often the cases cut across many topics and, unless being used deliberately as a comprehensive case, student confusion results. The statement of a specific solution—even though it does not have to be the only or definitive one—along with a statement of what actually happened, which students are always eager to hear, gives closure to students and better follows the thinking process to its proper end.

Another implication of Dewey’s views on subject matter and method is the exposure it gives to the discrepancy that professors observe between undergraduate and graduate case courses. In principle, undergraduates have more content or “working capital” with which to discuss cases than have graduate students, but for various reasons, such as taking courses out of sequence, this is not always true. Graduate students, on the other hand, are more mature and therefore more motivated than the undergraduates; they put more effort into studying the cases and are more talkative in class, but many of them do not have the “working capital” that the undergraduates have.

The issue that comes forth here is one of prerequisites: their enforcement at the undergraduate level and their existence—or lack thereof—for graduate students. Graduate students usually take the marketing case course only after having taken one other marketing course and a handful of other business courses. Their lack of “working capital” is especially noticeable when comparing the analyses of graduate students who hold different undergraduate degrees, say engineering versus business versus art; the engineering student usually does well on quantitative analysis, the business major on qualitative, but the poor art major often does well on neither. Such discrepancies in background significantly challenge the instructor’s ability to move students “in the direction of what the expert already knows.”

A second question that arises when comparing current practice of the project method with its original theory is the issue of student choice. That case analysis is a purposeful activity is evident, but is it “wholehearted”? Choice is usually offered in the assignment of the so-called term project; it seldom occurs in the case course, most likely because instructors panic at the thought of preparing twenty or thirty new cases every time the course is taught. The assignment of specific cases is the instructor’s means of organizing the course so it will add up to something retainable by the end of the term.

Kilpatrick (1918, p. 5) states that there exists a continuum between compulsion and wholehearted choice and that the wholeheartedness required to constitute a legitimate project lies at the upper end of this continuum. It can be argued that a large variety of cases, covering many problems in several different industries, does enable most students to engage their “whole hearts”

into the analyses. The original use of real life projects in vocational schools assumed that the projects by their very nature provided inherent interest to the students; somewhat of a similar assumption underlies the use of cases. And students usually testify that their interest is higher when analyzing cases than when enduring the usual fare of lectures and textbook reading.

The apparent dilemma of project method when applied to the case course is that choice is minimized in exchange for structure and purpose in the organization of the course. It is conceivable to say to students and—some instructors no doubt do this: “Here’s the book; you choose the twenty cases that we will discuss this term.” Dewey, however, it should be noted, was again highly critical of his progressive colleagues for granting excessive freedom and little or no direction to students. “The central job of education . . .,” he states, “is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1938, pp. 27-28). Intelligent freedom, he says, requires guidance of the immature by the more mature. “Mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control”; such activity may even end in “whim and caprice,” which is the “illusion of freedom,” not “intelligent judgment” (pp. 64-65).

One last question when comparing current practice of project method with its original theory is the notion that purposeful activities take place in a social environment. “All human experience,” Dewey says, “is ultimately social” because “it involves contact and communication” (1938, p. 38). Indeed, all business activity, and the entire world economy, is a system of social cooperation. The classroom and school is already a social environment, but Kilpatrick and other progressives did encourage group learning. What needs to be questioned here, however, is the effectiveness of so-called group or cooperative learning projects.

Whatever interpersonal skills a student may pick up while working on a group project in marketing research, that student more than likely cannot repeat the experience of conducting such a project on his or her own. This is especially noticeable when graduate students begin to work on their master’s theses; because their only experience in conducting primary data research was in a group, they are not prepared for the thesis. Learning has not taken place and this is as likely in other areas as well. As one witty critic of cooperative learning said, the group project “is another of the educationists’ self-serving delusions that if enough of the ignorant pool their resources, knowledge will appear, and that a parliament of fools can deliberate its way to wisdom” (Mitchell 1980, p. 80).

CONCLUSION

The aim of the project method as advocated by Dewey and Kilpatrick was to substitute free activity for the coerced passivity of traditional education. When applied at the university level, however, as has been demonstrated above, questions of execution arise. Indeed, one historian of the progressive education movement argued that much of the movement’s “watered-down curriculum” eventually became “a caricature of Dewey’s vision.” This historian goes on to blame Kilpatrick for moving educational theory and practice away from Dewey’s emphasis on subject matter and direction, especially at the high school level, and suggests that the ideal of free activity in progressive education is itself flawed—because hidden manipulation on the part of

instructors was always required to move students in their “free activities” to where instructors thought the students should be (Zilversmit 1993, pp. 173-76).

The pendulum seems to have swung too far, as it frequently does in intellectual history. In educators’ efforts to move away from the oppressive “sit-stillery” atmosphere of traditional education, they swung to the wasteful and destructive atmosphere of “anything goes.” Of this last, Dewey, in unusually pointed words, says, “Such a method is really stupid. For it attempts the impossible, which is always stupid; and it misconceives the conditions of independent thinking” (quoted in Thayer 1965, p. 253). The middle ground of subject matter, direction, organization, structure, and even the use of lectures and textbooks—all within a range of freedom to conduct individual projects—perhaps is the path to take, whether in a principles of marketing course, or in the capstone or graduate-level course.

Quoting Dewey, one last time, “The wise mother takes account of the needs of the infant but not in a way which dispenses with her own responsibility for regulating the objective conditions under which the needs are satisfied. . . . She draws upon past experiences of experts as well as her own for the light that these shed upon what experiences are in general most conducive to the normal development of infants” (1938, pp. 41-42). So also must instructors regulate the objective conditions under which their students’ needs are satisfied by drawing upon experiences of experts and of themselves in order to provide normal development of the students’ minds.

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