

Using Journaling to Enhance Learning and Critical Thinking in a Retailing Course

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Purpose of Study: This study describes a teaching innovation to enhance students' critical thinking skills and learning of concepts taught in a Retailing course.

Method/Design and Sample: This study tests the effectiveness of multiple journal submissions on exam scores which are designed to measure knowledge and mastery of retailing concepts.

Results: Results showed that the innovation positively impacted students' knowledge and mastery of material in the Retailing course. Students in a section of the course where the innovation was applied scored significantly higher on the three examinations administered over the course of the semester than students who did not participate in developing learning journals.

Value to Marketing Educators: Instructional innovations that are designed to take students beyond rote learning and are focused on the application and integration of knowledge have tremendous value. The use of a Learning Journal in a Retailing course accomplishes these goals by enhancing students' critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Retailing, Learning Journal, Critical Thinking

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Critical thinking is the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a positive outcome. "It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed" - the kind of thinking involved in business for "solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task." (Halpern, 2007, p. 6). Critical thinking is a consistently desired proficiency of employers when hiring college graduates (Hart Research Associates, 2015). While courses often use techniques such as lectures and examinations to measure the lower levels of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, knowledge, comprehension and application of concepts (Roy and Macchiette, 2005), students have been shown to retain information better when they are actively engaged in critical thinking (Schuyler, 1997) and focused on extending the learning process through analysis, synthesis and evaluation. One approach to enhancing critical thinking in courses is the incorporation of learning journals (Loo, 2002).

LEARNING JOURNALS

Learning journals are a mechanism for students to reflect on what they have learned in a course and relate it to real world applications and life experiences (Cunliffe 2004). Rather than making learning a passive activity, journaling forces students to actively engage in the learning process (Pavlovich et al 2009;

Peltier et al 2005). Journaling provides a variety of benefits for students to include (1) making connections between course material and experiences (Connor-Greene 2000), (2) promoting creativity and critical reflection (O'Connell and Dymont, 2011), (3) critically evaluating concepts and theories (Bahmani 2016), (4) allowing for more openness of experience (Natale & Ricci 2006), and (5) developing reflective skills that enhance self-confidence (Lyons 1999) and skill preparation for future careers (Lang & McNaught 2013).

While learning journals have been widely incorporated in the nursing and teacher education disciplines (Loo & Thorpe 2002), they have not been utilized as extensively in business courses (McHann & Frost, 2010). While the design and implementation of learning journals are as diverse as the courses in which they are used, one common thread in using this tool is that students reflect and write on course content as it relates to what they have personally experienced (Varner & Peck, 2003). Within business, most of the research reported on the use of learning journals has been within the Management domain (e.g. Varner & Peck, 2003; Parent & Lovelace, 2011). Marketers use of learning journals has been far more limited. Muncy (2014) used online blogs as a mechanism for students to reflect on what they learned in three different classes at different stages of a students' marketing education: Perspectives class (freshman/sophomore level), Introduction to Marketing class (junior level) and a Professional Selling class (junior/senior level). Each blog journal entry was evaluated on the extent of

reflection contained in the post. Additionally, students were evaluated on the number of journals completed as well as the average length of each posting. Finally, students were surveyed at the end of the semester to evaluate the journaling experience. While Muncy (2014) found that the online journaling activity did result in reflective learning (based on a review of each journal entry), students did not always perceive this to be the case when evaluating the journaling experience.

While past research has demonstrated that learning journals have been successfully used to encourage student reflection on course content and enhance critical thinking, we wanted to determine whether or not the use of learning journals would result in improved academic performance in a retailing course. Specifically, this paper describes how retail journals were utilized in a retailing course, the impact on students' exam scores, and the challenges observed when incorporating this pedagogical approach.

THE RETAILING LEARNING JOURNAL INNOVATION

Like most marketing professors, our classes incorporate lectures, textbook readings, and guided discussion. While these help students both acquire and interpret information about the subject matter for the course, the learning journal provided students with the opportunity to apply what they have learned to their personal and professional lives. Thus, allowing all students to participate in the three stages of learning as summarized by Garvin (2000); acquiring information, interpreting information, and applying information. While Garvin notes that application is "not always considered to be a part of the learning process," he also notes that "action is essential: if an entity does not purposefully modify its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights, it does not qualify as learning organization" (p. 26).

The learning journals were assigned based on selected course content areas which included retail consumers, the retail competitive environment, ethics,

market selection/location analysis, merchandising, retail pricing, promotion, customer service, and store layout/design. Because all students participated in retail activities as consumers, they were tasked with providing a one to two page written account of their personal experience as it related to the content area. Specifically, students were asked to discuss a concept or practice from the textbook readings for the topic area. The students had the freedom to write about what they wished as long as they could link it to their personal experience in their retailing interactions. In order to provide students with guidance on what was expected, students were told that each learning journal must have three parts:

1. A brief summary of the idea, concept or practice they have selected for the journal.
2. A description of the student's personal experience with the idea, concept or practice in a real-world retail setting.
3. A reflective summary of their retail experience with the idea, concept or practice.

Early in the semester, students seemed a bit daunted by the idea of the learning journal. However, we found that after receiving personalized feedback on their first one or two journal entries, students became more comfortable with the process. This feedback is absolutely critical. We developed an easy to use rubric (see Table 1) for grading each learning journal. In addition to the rubric components shown, students' journals were evaluated on the quality of the writing. Students with minor writing errors received a two-point deduction in their grade for each learning journal submission, while students with writing errors that severely detracted from understanding the content received a five-point deduction. This was done so that students would take the time to read and edit their journal entry prior to submission since the ability to communicate in writing is an important skill expected by all employers. Using the rubric made grading the learning journal easier and provided a standardized mechanism that was simple for students to understand.

Table 1
Grading Rubric for the Learning Journal

Component: A brief summary of the idea, concept or practice	
5 points	Summary of retailing idea/concept/practice defined thoroughly and accurately
4 points	Summary show basic understanding of the retailing idea/concept/practice
3 points	Summary indicates some misunderstanding of the retailing idea/concept/practice; some key element(s) omitted
2 points	Provided textbook definition only; does not translate into his/her own words
1 point	Does not specifically identify the retailing idea/concept/practice; does not discuss course concept
0 points	Summary missing or completely inaccurate
Instructor Comments:	

Component: Description of personal experience in real-world retail setting	
5 points	Description of personal experience is thoroughly depicted
3 points	Description does not provide thorough depiction of personal experience; key element(s) omitted
1 point	Description of personal experience not explicitly tied to retailing idea/concept/practice
0 points	Description of personal experience missing or in no way related to retailing idea/concept/practice
Instructor Comments:	
Component: Reflection of the retail experience with the idea, concept or practice	
5 points	Thorough reflection that fully shows connection between concept and experience
3 points	Reflection shows a limited use of personal experiences to illustrate course concepts
2 points	Weak reflection; linkage between experience and concept is unclear
1 point	Reflection is primarily unsupported opinion
0 points	Reflection is missing or does not apply the experience with the retailing idea/concept/practice
Instructor Comments:	

What we found to be important to enhancing student learning was the written feedback provided on the journal entry. Personalized feedback, in addition to the scoring metric, provided students with a better understanding of how they could improve their learning. Additionally, it provided us insights as to what students did or did not understand about the subject matter itself. This helped us better assess our effectiveness in teaching retailing and provided an important opportunity to revisit a topic or concept in order to deepen a student's understanding.

ASSESSING THE INNOVATION

The purpose of incorporating the Retailing Learning Journal was to increase students' critical thinking and to use learning by doing in engaging students in course content. In order to assess the impact of the innovation, we implemented the Retailing Learning Journal in one section of a junior level Retailing course (the experimental group); in the second section (the control group) journaling was not used. Both sections were taught in the same semester in two consecutive class periods by the same professor. Other than the use of the learning journal, all other course components (to include quizzes, exams, course material, and semester team project) and the class schedules were identical. One initial observation became readily apparent early in the semester.

Students in the section assigned the Retailing Learning Journal engaged in discussion much more readily and with a better depth of understanding of the material than students in the other section. While this was certainly a positive and desired outcome, this is, at best, anecdotal evidence. We knew that we could make no definitive claim that the innovation enhanced student learning solely based on guided class discussion. Ultimately, what we wanted to know was whether or not students who completed the Retailing Learning Journal outperformed their peers in course examinations. In previous semesters test scores were consistent across sections of the course. Three examinations of equal weight were administered at relatively equal intervals across the semester. All of the exams consisted of multiple choice and short answer questions. Table 2 shows a comparison of average scores for each of the three exams. These results provide strong evidence that the use of the Retailing Learning Journal was successful in positively impacting students' learning in the Retailing course. Specifically, the score for each exam was significantly higher for the class that incorporated the journal. The exam scores for the students who did not participate in journaling mirrored the average exam scores from the previous four semesters. Thus, it is apparent that the innovation had the desired effect of improving critical thinking and learning of retailing concepts.

Table 2
Exam Scores: Experimental vs Control Group

	Control Group N = 39 Mean (SD)	Experimental Group N = 40 Mean (SD)	t-value & Significance
Exam #1	75.44 (10.49)	82.49 (9.49)	3.135 (p ≤ .002)
Exam #2	73.31 (9.04)	78.81 (10.39)	2.510 (p ≤ .014)
Exam #3	65.77 (11.16)	72.08 (9.45)	2.715 (p ≤ .008)

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

In addition to improved academic performance on each of the course examinations, there were other benefits derived from the use of the Retailing Learning Journal. We found that students' writing improved over the course of the semester. This not only served to enhance the overall quality of the journals as the semester progressed, it also resulted in higher quality submissions for the team semester project. Another positive outcome was that the scheduled journal assignments promoted more regular reading of the course material. As one student noted on their course evaluation: "In order to write my journals, I found myself reading the text more than I usually do. Ultimately, this extra reading helped me make better sense of what was discussed in class and helped me better put the material into real-life situations. If I didn't have to write the journals, I am sure I would have skimmed the book at best." Students also indicated that the learning journals caused them to be more engaged with the course material. As one student commented: "I became more interested in the course topics because of the journal. Rather than simply memorizing material for the test, I found myself thinking about things we covered in class in a way that I had not before." Another student noted: "Over the past semester, I was surprised to discover that the learning journal actually made me think about what I was learning. In doing this, I actually created my own opinions – hopefully, you could see this in my journals."

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

As with any innovative approach there were challenges in using the Retailing Learning Journal. The initial hurdle encountered in implementing a journaling component is trepidation on the part of students. Today's students are uncomfortable with ambiguity and often struggle with written assignments. Additionally, when students hear the word "journal" they often associate it with the diaries that contain a person's innermost thoughts and feelings. These challenges can be easily overcome by providing students with a sample journal entry so that they have

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a model they can emulate. Also, the more students provide their thoughts in written form, the easier it becomes and the quality of the writing improves.

Another challenge with this type of innovation is the extra work involved on the part of the instructor. It takes time and effort to read and evaluate the journals. Even with the structured evaluation rubric (see Table 1), providing feedback letting students know what they have done well and in which areas they can improve takes time. While it is possible to incorporate a Learning Journal in a Retailing course without an evaluation component and to use it as a springboard for class discussion, we know that students will focus on what is graded in determining where to expend their efforts in a course. We believe the time evaluating and providing feedback on the Retailing Learning Journal is well spent given our goals that students understand retailing concepts, can apply them, and think about what they have learned critically.

This innovation can be easily adapted depending on the desires of the instructor. The innovation could be extended through the incorporation of a "wrap-up" or cumulative journal submission that provides students' reflections on what they learned in the retailing course overall. It could also be shortened by requesting fewer submissions throughout the semester. Instructors may also choose to have students submit journals two or three times during the semester rather than on an almost weekly basis in order to reduce the amount of individual grading and feedback. The disadvantage of fewer submissions, however, is that students will not receive the frequent feedback that will benefit their learning of retailing concepts and improve subsequent journal submissions

CONCLUSION

We believe that the skills learned by journaling is something that students can continue to use throughout their academic and professional lives long after the conclusion of the Retailing course. By regularly and intentionally inquiring into their thoughts and actions, they practice continuous and lifelong learning.

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