IDENTIFICATION OF THE ACTIVE LEARNING PROBLEM

When you ask marketing professors to describe their teaching philosophies, invariably one hears about a focus on some version of the following: active learning, hands-on learning, or an involvement-oriented approach. One way or another, the professors will emphasize that they focus on active learning and do not spend much class time lecturing. However, when one walks by classrooms where marketing professors are working, the professors can usually be heard lecturing. While almost everyone supports the general concept of some form of “active” learning, there has been only modest movement toward more active forms of learning (Watts and Becker 2008). Some of the potential alternatives to the lecture method within marketing education include the case method, computer simulations, role playing, client-based service learning projects, internships, and myriad other innovative approaches to hands-on learning, many of which have been introduced in Marketing Education Review.

Despite these more participatory alternatives, the lecture method still seems to capture the majority of class time (Lammers and Murphy 2002; Watts and Becker 2008). In fact, while we do not have a precise estimate within just the marketing discipline, our colleagues in economics recently reported that traditional lectures accounted for 83 percent of class time in introductory economics classes (Watts and Becker 2008). And in marketing research classes, PowerPoint was recently reported to be the most frequently used teaching technology (Wilson, Neeley, and Niedzwiecki 2009). This may be totally appropriate, especially when the course goals focus on introducing students to new terminology and fundamental concepts prior to their application or other more active forms of skill development.

In teaching as well as in other aspects of life, we often avoid innovation and instead do what we already know how to do. While performance varies, at least most people know how a lecture is done. Using any of the more active forms of learning is more difficult than the traditional lecture and involves giving up control while increasing ambiguity for both the teacher and the students.

Consequently, despite all the talk about “active” learning, students get most of their classroom instruction through lectures, which for them is a very passive form of learning. This is unfortunate given the poor results reported for the lecture method in comparison to several other, more active teaching methods such as role playing and experimentation (e.g., Wood 2004). There is no doubt that the more participatory student-centric forms of teaching/learning lead to improved assessment outcomes (Graeff 2010; Steward et al. 2010). In addition, today’s college students prefer a more active form of learning than the frequently used lecture method (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken 2000). Clearly, there is a need for more active forms of teaching/learning within
the marketing curriculum. Furthermore, while the lecture may be an adequate method for developing the “knowledge” component of Bloom’s (1956) well-known hierarchy of learning objectives, achieving higher levels on this respected taxonomy may require more active approaches to the teaching/learning process.

**ENHANCING RELEVANCE WITHIN THE MARKETING CURRICULUM**

While the case has already been made for the need to increase usage of more active learning methodologies, many professors, including marketing professors, are reluctant to reduce the focus on lecturing and devote more time to other teaching/learning techniques (Csapo and Wilson 2001; Graeff 2010). An important reason for this is the substantially increased amount of time required as well as the difficulty in finding or developing appropriate alternatives to the classic lecture (Kolenko et al. 1996; Niemi 2002; Pundak et al. 2009).

Consequently, there is great value in reporting various projects and methods for expanding a range of active learning approaches within the marketing curriculum in general and in sales courses in particular (e.g., Neely and Cherry 2010; Shaw 2007). This paper describes an application of active learning within both the professional selling as well as the sales management class. A set of forms and other materials useful in managing the process was developed and is available upon request from the corresponding author.

**THE INNOVATION**

An innovative sales project involving an experiential learning opportunity was designed for marketing students within a business-to-business context. The innovation involved students in two different courses: professional selling and sales management. This advancement could be described as “guided learning by doing with reflection.” Students assumed the roles of sales representatives or sales managers for a golf outing. The event was a fund-raiser for scholarships for entering freshmen at the university. Executives working at local businesses represented the target market. The products sold for the golf outing included sponsorships, the donation of door prizes, and group ticket sales.

Students enrolled in the two courses typically did not have prior sales experience within a business-to-business context, although some students may have had a retail sales background. Some students may even have had preconceived, stereotypical notions relating to a sales career based on their buying experiences at the retail level. Thus, students entered the courses with minimal knowledge of the business-to-business sales context.

The overall objective of the sales project in both the sales management and the professional selling courses was to reinforce the concepts introduced via textbooks through real-world opportunities to practice that acquired knowledge. For the students enrolled in the professional selling class, the goals were the knowing, practicing, and executing the primary functions of a sales representative. The learning objectives included aspects such as (1) demonstrating proficiency in the basic steps in the sales process, (2) adhering to professional and ethical standards, and (3) managing the daily functions of a sales territory. For students in the sales management class, the goals were the knowing, practicing, and executing the primary functions of a sales manager. The learning objectives included components such as (1) designing geographical territories with quotas, call rates, and frequencies; (2) creating a process for selecting salespeople; (3) conducting training of salespeople; (4) designing a sales compensation plan; (5) motivating employees; (6) creating and implementing a performance evaluation system; and (7) managing the daily functions of a sales district.

The sales project encompassed an entire 16-week semester and required the participation of two faculty members since the two courses must be taught simultaneously in terms of days and times. This scheduling requirement ensured mutual availability for all the individuals associated with the endeavor. Six weeks were spent in the classroom combining lectures and other more applied learning exercises, followed by nine weeks of real-world learning, then ending with a final week of feedback and assessment. An important component of this innovative was that the sales management students were actively involved in managing the sales activities of the professional selling students. Few articles in the literature document students working with each other across different courses, with the notable exception of Mantel et al. (2002). The idea of coordinating the two courses stemmed from a desire to provide the senior-level sales management students with a unique culminating experience that built on their prior involvement as junior-level professional selling students for the golf outing.

In the professional selling class, in addition to the steps in the selling process, ethical issues and professionalism were discussed. The importance of sales to the overall success of a company was stressed. Early in the semester, the students completed a self-assessment of their sales aptitude. This document would later be shared with the sales managers during the interview process. A major emphasis
The sales managers were required to accompany each sales representative on several sales calls throughout the four weeks and complete field work-with reports. In addition, all the sales managers were given a small expense account to assist in holding a monthly sales meeting for their staff. The sales managers also assigned continuing education exercises to the sales representatives. Also, on a weekly basis, the sales managers met for breakfast with the supervising faculty to discuss the prior week in the field and submit weekly district report forms. The sales managers also submitted one expense report.

During the same four-week time frame, the sales representatives were expected to complete a given number of cold calls. The sales representatives also focused on retention rates, resurrection rates, and territory development. They completed customer order forms, cold-call logs, weekly territory reports, and customer profile forms. In addition, continued education assignments in the form of trade articles and online sales training modules were made available to the sales representatives. If poor performance or conflict arose involving a sales representative, the sales manager would meet with the supervising faculty, receive appropriate coaching, and then attempt to resolve the matter without the intervention of a faculty member. In the rare case involving the dismissal of a sales representative, the supervising faculty would meet with both individuals.

To help motivate the sales representatives throughout the selling period, the sales managers designed incentive and contest programs. Rewards were both monetary and nonmonetary. The incentive program was tied to overall sales dollars generated. Every sales representative could earn as much as $100 in gift certificates. The contest program was primarily nonmonetary in nature with recognition certificates going to only top performing sales representatives for items such as Sales Rep of the Year, Most Improved Rep, and Professionalism. Retention rate and territory development gift certificates were also awarded, but for the top two sales representatives only. Corresponding incentive and contest programs designed by the supervising faculty were made available to reward the efforts of the sales managers.

Once the field work was completed, the next two weeks were spent conducting performance evaluations. The sales managers completed written evaluations for all the sales representatives, consulted with the supervising faculty on the appropriateness and administration of the reviews, and then met individually with each sales representative to discuss their performances. The evaluation form used a point system and assessed areas such as sales performance, effort, and skill development. Individual incentives and
incorporate textbook concepts that were introduced during the first six weeks of the course. The students discussed their personal experiences as sales managers relating to concepts such as leading, organizing, recruiting and selecting, training, setting sales goals and budgets, motivating, rewarding, evaluating performance, and ethics.

HOW THE INNOVATION ADDRESSES THE PROBLEM

Given the need for greater use of more active teaching/learning methods within the marketing curriculum, the innovation presented in this paper provides a useful example of how experiential learning can be implemented. This form of service learning, or learning by doing, provides an excellent alternative to the lecture method and expands the “tool kit” of more active, participatory teaching/learning approaches. Given that ambiguity, difficulty in developing or finding course projects, and a lack of experience often hinders adoption of these types of learning innovations, the description provided herein for this innovation can help other marketing professors implement a better alternative to the clearly suboptimal lecture method when teaching marketing to Generation Y students, who are characterized by extreme multitasking.

ASSESSMENT OF THE INNOVATION

Overall, this innovative approach for teaching/learning professional selling and sales management was successful. Like any other advancement, however, there were pros as well as cons. The most significant positive aspect of this form of “practice by doing,” was the realism and job experience provided to our students. For many, it was their first experience managing others or in making sales calls. It helped several students in their job searches by giving them a story to tell when interacting with recruiters. They could honestly say that they now had successful sales experience.

Student evaluations of both courses were higher than when more traditional (less active) teaching methods were used. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, student feedback was quite positive and, in some cases, life-altering as a consequence of participation in the project. Relationships among students and the professors were enhanced and substantially deepened through the project. The marketing department received a great deal of positive publicity nationally as well as within the local community. Positive word-of-mouth promotion among students and potential students was increased. And, not to be overlooked, the project was also
a successful fund-raiser for a good cause, raising additional scholarship monies for the next year’s entering freshmen class at our university.

While the project was judged to be successful, it was not without its disadvantages. In particular, the amount of time the professors devoted to the project was very high. There was substantial time commitments outside of the normal class hours spent in group meetings and many one-on-one interactions with students, such as when they were not completing assignments on time or at a satisfactory level. Consequently, other potentially useful faculty activities had to be reduced to make up for the extra time required to manage this innovative learning project. Some of this time commitment could be considered “start-up” costs, however, and subsequent iterations of the project became more manageable.

The innovation could also be improved in future semesters. Pre- and post-surveys to use for outcome assessments need to be designed that will allow students to clearly express their states of mind and experiences. A managerial skill assessment questionnaire is needed to supplement the existing leadership survey. Also, course exam scores should be included in future assessments in terms of comparing the effectiveness of this innovation to that of the traditional lecture approach.

**ADAPTABILITY OF THE INNOVATION**

This innovative approach could be used within a variety of marketing courses across different environments for multiple purposes. The basic take-away from this project is the notion that professors can “stop telling and start doing” some of the professional activities within a discipline. In this project, professional selling students were required to sell and sales management students were required to manage that sales force. A key factor in making the project appropriate is that the rewards from revenue for the “product” being sold must benefit others, not just those most directly involved in the project. The funds raised were used to support a good cause—scholarships for next year’s first-year students. No reasonable student could argue against the merit of such use of the funds. There were no conflicts of interest, and none of the professors had the potential for financial gain from the project.

This innovation could be adapted for use within other marketing classes. For example, the retailing class might get involved with the actual operation of a retail store. Or the advertising class might become the subcontractor handling all of the advertising activities for the university’s student newspaper. This form of “hands-on” learning could become an important form of professional development within the marketing curriculum. Other important considerations are the span of control for the managers and the supervising faculty. We recommend a span of control of one manager for every three representatives. However, the span of control for the supervising faculty must also be carefully considered. We recommend one instructor for every 20 managers to allow for ample coaching opportunities as well as effective managerial practices overall. If these simple rubrics are followed, the experience could easily be scaled to any size class.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper described the need for greater levels of active learning within the marketing curriculum and described a successful application of learning by doing within multiple sections of professional selling and sales management courses. Perhaps some of the ideas presented here could be applied within professional selling and sales management classes at other universities. Or maybe these ideas will stimulate some creative thoughts about teaching within a wider variety of contexts, and new applications suitable
for alternative content areas will be developed. The paper explained a specific application of active learning in which students in the professional selling class engaged in a wide range of selling activities. An important aspect of the project was that these students were “managed” by students in the sales management class. Both groups had an opportunity to learn important content knowledge as well as develop and refine skills appropriate to each respective class. While this innovation represents an important form of service learning within the marketing curriculum, note that this approach to teaching/learning requires a substantial increase in the time devoted to teaching. Given the multiple demands on faculty beyond normal teaching responsibilities, it is important to recognize that achieving these higher levels of learning through more active participation can be time consuming, but very productive in the professional development of our students.

REFERENCES
