MARKETING

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING RESEARCH

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No 40
November 2006

Threshold concepts in teaching and learning undergraduate marketing research

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ABSTRACT: *The paper reports on the possibilities and limitations of identifying threshold concepts in the subject of marketing research. Threshold concepts are distinct key concepts of a subject, which, if well understood, can lead to a transformed way of viewing the subject and reality in general. The empirical study focused on evaluating a list of selected key concepts of undergraduate marketing research to determine whether or not any of these concepts could be included in a more structured research project on threshold concepts. The research results show that 15 of the 35 selected concepts possess characteristics that make these concepts potential threshold concepts. Further studies are required to determine whether or not these 15 concepts possess the characteristics of threshold concepts.*

KEYWORDS: threshold concept, transformative concept, irreversible concept, integrative concept, bounded concept, counter-intuitive concept, marketing education

Introduction

The goal of undergraduate marketing research courses, as Stern and Tseng (2002, 225) succinctly put it, is "to provide needed skills, thinking, and processes to students, who desire to work either within the research field or as managers and users of research information". Achieving the goal of marketing research courses depends on the extent to which tutors succeed in teach the subject and also the extent to which learners manage to grasp the subject matter.

A variety of teaching and learning methods are reported in published literature. One teaching method, widely adopted in the United States, is the 'Madeline Hunter Method', also known as the 'Madeline Hunter Direct Instruction Model' (Burns, 2006; Hunter, 1985). The Madeline Hunter Method involves students in learning a subject through a series of steps that are meant to "systematically educate students with a goal of mastery of the subject matter" (Burns, 2006, 284). Although the use of Madeline Hunter Method in teaching marketing research is reported to be popular in the United States (Burns, 2006), there are no published reports of its adoption elsewhere. Another teaching and learning marketing research method that is extensively covered in published literature is the 'experiential method' (Bridges, 1999; Graeff, 1997; O'Hara and Shaffer, 1995; Peltier, Schibrowsky and Kleimenhagen, 1995; Wynd, 1989). The experiential method is essentially centred on involving students in 'live' sponsored marketing research projects throughout the course as a way of reinforcing concepts taught in class. The sponsored marketing projects typically involve students in practical marketing research process activities, such as identifying marketing problems, formulating research designs, data collection, data analysis and writing the report. One reported disadvantage of the experiential method is the high refusal rate of respondents in giving information to students during data collection, which tends to stall the progress of the project and the intended learning objectives significantly (Burns, 2006). The experiential method also appears

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to be more oriented towards practical activities than the theory of marketing research. It could be argued that for students to derive maximum benefits from the experiential method there is a need to provide in-depth coverage of the marketing research concepts. The theoretical knowledge could then underpin the practical experiential method. A newly introduced idea of 'threshold concepts' could be used to complement the practical oriented experiential method.

Meyer and Land (2002) introduced the idea of threshold concepts in teaching and learning. According to Meyer and Land (2003, 1), threshold concepts represent "*a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress*". Understanding threshold concepts provides a privileged view of a subject and vantage point for a deeper comprehension of a phenomenon. Threshold concepts are of interest to lecturers and learners in Higher Education because these concepts have the potential to resolve two teaching and learning related problems. First, threshold concepts have the potential to enhance learners' capability to grasp the theoretical foundations of a subject instead of learning by rote. Second, threshold concepts could enable learners, not only to acquire formal knowledge of a discipline, but also to use this knowledge in everyday life experiences.

In the light of the potential benefits of threshold concepts to teaching and learning environment, attempts have been made to establish these concepts in statistics (Dunn, Low, and Ardington, 2003) and economics (Davies and Mangan, 2005). The reported successful identification of threshold concepts in statistics and economics provides reasonable grounds for optimism that these concepts could be established in a wide range of subjects, including marketing research.
The purpose of this study was to explore the opportunities and limitations of establishing threshold concepts for the subject of marketing research.

Characteristics of threshold concepts

There is a paucity of published literature on threshold concepts, most probably, due to the infancy of the idea of threshold concepts in the teaching and learning research arena. Meyers and Land (2003) are credited with the initial research work on threshold concepts. They provided a seminal conceptual definition of threshold concepts as "a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (Meyer and land, 2003, 1). Threshold concepts are also conceived of as transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and potentially troublesome (Davies and Mangan, 2005; Mayer and Land, 2003). These characteristics of threshold concepts are the basis for establishing the concepts for any given subject. It is known to be difficult to operationalise threshold concepts (Davies and Mangan, 2005).

First, threshold concepts are thought of as transformative in the sense that once acquired, they can change the learner's perception of the subject or even the learner's view of the world. The transformative effect occurs when the learner acquires a deeper understanding of the concept that enables a person to use the concept in explaining novel situations. An example of transformative effect given in published literature is *opportunity costs* when used to explain rational choices in novel situations (Davies and Mangan, 2005). The competent use of opportunity costs in explaining

rational choices is considered to be a result of adopting 'deep learning approach' instead of adopting the 'surface learning approach'. The ideas of deep and surface learning approaches were originally developed by Marton and Säljö (1976) and later elaborated by other researchers, notably Biggs (1987, 1993), Entwistle (1981), and Ramsden (1992). Deep learning refers to internally motivated learning, in which the learner has intention to understand rather than simply pass an assessment task (Marton and Säljö, 1997; Warburton, 2003). Students who adopt surface learning, on the other hand, practice rote learning, accepting ideas passively and do the minimum requirements for passing an assessment task.

A deep learning approach for threshold concepts of marketing research would enable learners to explain inter-relations between key concepts in addition to properties of the concepts. For example, learners who acquire knowledge of the concepts of 'management decision problem' and 'marketing research problem' would be able to explain clearly how the information oriented 'marketing research problem' is geared towards addressing the action oriented 'management decision problem'. Most students struggle to comprehend the nature and inter-relatedness of these key concepts (Bridges, 1999). In this study, the focus was on identifying the opportunities and limitations of identifying threshold concepts in marketing research. On the face of it, it appears more challenging to identify threshold concepts in marketing research than economics or statistics. This is because, compared to economics and statistics, concepts of marketing research are less 'bounded', as they are borrowed from different subjects such as management, sociology, psychology, statistics and economics.

Second, threshold concepts are considered to be irreversible. It is assumed that once a learner has acquired the new perspective of a subject or of the world, it should be difficult, if not impossible, for the learner to revert to the original view of the subject or the world. This key characteristic of threshold concept might be difficult to determine because establishing that a concept is irreversible would require testing the learner's level of understanding of the threshold concepts over an extended period of time. Research work that involves studying people over an extended period of time could suffer from dropout of the research subjects. This could be one major limitations of determining threshold concepts using students as respondents.

Third, threshold concepts are described as integrative. According to Meyer and Land (2003), integrativeness of threshold concepts is the capacity of the concept to expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of ideas or concepts within the subject. This characteristic of threshold concept, if applicable, would be useful to students of marketing research. Anecdotal evidence from conversations with colleagues who teach undergraduate marketing research and students' performance in coursework and examinations of marketing research suggest that most students experience problems in trying to relate concepts within the marketing research process. For example, students often find it hard to grasp the interrelatedness of concepts, e.g. relating 'management decision problem' with 'marketing research problem'; 'marketing research problem' with 'research objectives'; 'research objectives' with 'operational definitions'; 'operational definitions' with 'questions' in the questionnaire; 'data analysis' with 'research objectives', etc.

Fourth, a threshold concept is 'bounded'. A bounded threshold concept means that the concept helps to delineate the boundaries of the subject area. The bounded characteristic seems to work well in traditional subjects such as economics and statistics. It is debatable whether modules like marketing research, which borrow concepts from various subject areas, can have bounded concepts.

Fifth, threshold concepts may be considered to be counter-intuitive, or lead to knowledge that is inherently counter- intuitive. The counter-intuitive characteristic of threshold concepts is sometimes referred to as being 'troublesome' concepts (Perkins, 1999). Perkins (1999) defines troublesome knowledge as that which appears to the learner to be counter-intuitive, or alien, originating from unfamiliar culture or discourse or incoherent.

Most of these characteristics are difficult to establish directly. However, these characteristics could be established indirectly, for example, by establishing only one key linking characteristic of threshold concepts. As Davies and Mangan (2005) point out, the first three characteristics of threshold concepts are interwoven. For a concept that integrates prior understanding is, by definition, transformative because it changes or transforms the learner's perception of the subject. If a concept integrates a spectrum of prior understanding, it is more likely to be irreversible once the leaner acquires it. The learner uses the concept to stick together his/her understanding of the different concept. Davies and Mangan (2005, 3) suggest that, "to abandon such a threshold concept would be massively disruptive to an individual's whole way of thinking". The identification of threshold concepts is usually based on the evaluation of certain key concepts, determining whether or not such concepts possess the characteristics of threshold concepts. The purpose of this study was to identify the key concepts that could be included in the evaluation of threshold concepts.

The key concepts had to meet the criteria outlined below, which were determined from learners' point of view. First, learners were to perceive such concepts as important for gaining new insight into the subject of marketing research. The rationale was that the greater the learners' agreement that the concept was important, the more likely the concept was to be a threshold concept. Second, the concept was to be considered difficult to understand because threshold concepts are assumed to be 'troublesome'. Third, learners should consider it necessary to have background knowledge or previous knowledge in order to understand a concept that can be threshold. Fourth, learners' perception on whether the concept was counter-intuitive or not was sought. It was expected that concepts that are potentially threshold were counter-intuitive. The study was therefore centred on the following research questions in an effort to identify the key concepts:

1. To what extent do learners consider the understanding of concepts included in the study to be important for gaining new insight into the subject of market research?
2. To what extent do learners think that they understand concepts involved in the study?
3. To what extent do learners consider previous knowledge to be necessary for grasping concepts included in this study?
4. To what extent do learners consider concepts included in this study to be counter-intuitive?

The empirical study

The initial concepts were drawn from textbooks of marketing research in common use in the UK: Burns and Bush (2006); Hair et al. (2006); and Malhotra and Peterson (2006). The concepts involved in the exploratory study are listed in table 1 below.

Table 1: Key concepts of marketing research

Marketing research process	Probability sampling methods
Management decision problem	Non-probability sampling methods
Marketing research objectives/questions	Normal distribution
Research constructs	Standardised normal distribution curve
Operational definitions	Population parameter
Exploratory research design	Sample statistic
Descriptive research design	Standard error
Causal research design	Sample size determination
Quantitative research methods	Sampling error
Qualitative research methods	Non-sampling error
Variables	Inferential analysis
Levels of measurement of scales	Confidence interval
Reliability of measurement	Hypothesis testing
Validity of measurement	Difference analysis
Descriptive analysis	Associative analysis
Frequencies/percentages	Cross tabulations
Measures of central tendency	Correlations
Measures of dispersion	

These concepts were then listed in the module handbook so that students registered for the marketing research module at Middlesex University in the first semester of the academic year 2005/2006 could refer to them. The concepts were introduced to the students in the first lecture of the semester. In the 9th of the 11 scheduled teaching weeks, students were given a questionnaire to fill in, focusing on answering the research questions.

Questionnaire design

Students were asked to answer questions indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding each of the key concepts. Following Davies and Mangan's (2005) theoretical framework of threshold concepts, students were asked to rate the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale:

1. The understanding of concept is very important for gaining new insight into the marketing research module (MKT2252)
2. I understand this concept very well
3. Previous knowledge is required to grasp this concept in the marketing research module (MKT2252)
4. The knowledge I gained prior to attending this module prepared me for understanding this concept
5. On the face of it (before explanation is given), this concept seems to be counter-intuitive

Questionnaires were distributed in seminars. It was expected that more students would be contacted in compulsory seminars than in voluntary lectures. All students who attended the seminar of the day of the interview were asked to fill in the questionnaire. 96 students filled in the questionnaire. Ten of these questionnaires were spoilt, remaining with 86 usable questionnaires.

The research results

The concepts that were included in the study and their respective mean ratings are shown in table 2 below. The concepts are listed in the first column of the table. The mean ratings are shown for each of these concepts along the following dimensions, which are shown in the table in the corresponding numbers, i.e. (**1**) the extent to which students thought the concept was important for gaining insight into marketing research, (**2**) the extent to which students thought they understood the concept, (**3**) the extent to which students believed that previous knowledge is required to understand the concept, and (**4**) the extent to which students considered the concept to be counter-intuitive.

Table 2: Mean ratings of students' perceptions of 35 key marketing research concepts on four dimensions

Key concepts	Mean ratings			
	1	2	3	4
Marketing research process	4.48*	4.16*	3.72	2.48
Management decision problem	4.29*	4.08*	3.69	2.65
Marketing research objectives/questions	4.40*	4.10*	3.67	2.67
Research constructs	3.85	3.57	3.17	3.27
Operational definitions	3.70	3.17	2.91	3.42
Exploratory research design	4.22*	3.70	3.38	2.88
Descriptive research design	4.23*	3.70	3.48	2.83
Causal research design	3.86	3.36	3.31	3.10
Quantitative research methods	4.38*	4.16*	3.90	2.51
Qualitative research methods	4.31*	4.16*	3.85	2.50
Variables	3.81	3.42	3.47	2.90
Levels of measurement of scales	3.86	3.30	3.22	3.21
Reliability of measurement	3.93	3.29	3.29	3.01
Validity of measurement	3.91	3.41	3.24	2.97
Descriptive analysis	4.20*	3.57	3.33	2.98
Frequencies/percentages	3.73	3.36	3.08	3.33
Measures of central tendency	3.44	2.98	2.92	3.62
Measures of dispersion	3.45	3.02	2.86	3.47
Probability sampling methods	3.91	3.47	3.38	3.23
Non probability sampling methods	3.81	3.41	3.29	3.21
Normal distribution	3.69	3.36	3.29	3.03
Standardised normal distribution curve	3.49	3.19	3.23	3.14
Population parameter	3.43	3.05	2.87	3.38
Sample statistic	3.81	3.17	3.02	3.16
Standard error	3.73	3.19	3.14	3.41
Sample size determination	3.87	3.50	3.27	3.06
Sampling error	3.81	3.37	3.09	3.33
Non sampling error	3.73	3.24	2.95	3.28
Inferential analysis	3.45	2.67	2.47	3.68
Confidence interval	3.65	2.94	2.58	3.47
Hypothesis testing	3.74	3.24	2.98	3.14
Difference analysis	3.65	2.77	2.64	3.54
Associative analysis	3.47	2.72	2.52	3.52
Cross tabulations	3.59	2.93	2.87	3.43
Correlation	3.81	3.28	3.31	3.14

* Mean ratings of 4 or more points on the Likert scale

(1) Extent to which students consider concepts to be important for gaining new insight into the marketing research module

Eight concepts were considered to be most important for gaining new insight into the marketing research module, with a mean rating for importance of 4 or more points. These are marketing research process, management decision problem, marketing research question, quantitative research design, qualitative research design, descriptive research design, exploratory research design, and descriptive analysis. These results are comparable to those of another study (Stern and Tseng, 2002) in which it was established that academics like to see the following concepts included in the study of marketing research: questionnaire design, data analysis and interpretation for descriptive methods, the research process, sampling, and quantitative data

collection methods. Concepts that were thought to be of least importance to the understanding of marketing research in this study are predominantly concerned with statistical analysis of data. These are, validity measurement, frequency data output, measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, and inference statistics. The rest of the concepts were thought to be of moderate level of importance.

(2) Extent to which students thought they understood the concepts

Students thought that they understood five concepts, rated at more than 4. These are marketing research process, management decision problem, management research questions, and quantitative research design. Students are taught these concepts over a longer period than the other concepts. The relatively longer period of exposure to the concepts might have contributed to students' understanding of the concepts. Interestingly, these concepts are among those considered to be important for gaining insight into the module. Concepts that were considered to be least important were concerned with statistical data analysis, which are inferential analysis, confidence interval, analysis of differences among means, association among variables and cross tabulation. Some of the results did not make much sense. For example, it was surprising that students thought that they understood correlation better than cross tabulation and hypothesis better than confidence interval. One would expect that students would grasp cross tabulation before correlation and confidence interval before hypothesis testing.

(3) Extent to which learners thought that previous knowledge helped them understand concepts

Students did not agree with the view that previous knowledge helped them to grasp the concepts. They thought that they were particularly less prepared for the following concepts: measure of central tendency, measures of dispersion, population parameter, non sampling error, inferential analysis, confidence interval, hypothesis testing, analysis of association, cross tabulation, and correlation. It is not surprising that students involved in this study found these concepts to be challenging. Though basic statistics is usually pre-requisite for the marketing research module, a high number of students usually struggle to cope with the statistics component of the module (Bridges, 1999).

(4) Extent to which learners consider concepts to be counter-intuitive

Students thought that the concepts which they perceived as counter-intuitive were mainly concerned with statistical data analysis, such as, measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, inferential analysis, confidence intervals, difference analysis, hypothesis testing, analysis of association, cross tabulation, and correlation. Concepts that were considered to be unproblematic are marketing research process, management decision problem, management research question, exploratory research design, descriptive design, quantitative research design, qualitative research, construct, and validity measures. Probably, students thought they understood these concepts because the concepts were introduced in early lectures, thus giving students more time to grasp them.

Conclusions

As already pointed out, it was interesting to see that the concepts which learners claimed to understand well were part of those concepts that were considered to be important for gaining new insight into the marketing research module. These concepts were marketing research process, management decision problem, management research question, and quantitative research design. The concepts that were considered to be important but not understood were all concerned with research design, i.e. qualitative research design, descriptive research design, and exploratory research design.

Concepts, which the learners claimed that they lacked previous knowledge, were the same concepts considered as counter-intuitive. These were mostly statistical concepts, which are, measures of central tendency, measures dispersion, inferential analysis, confidence intervals, hypothesis testing, analysis of associations, cross tabulations, and correlation. These concepts are also potential candidates of threshold concepts because they are perceived as counter- intuitive. They are, however, not considered to be integrative because students claimed that they did not have previous knowledge of the concepts.

In summary, the results of the study suggest that 15 key concepts of marketing research in table 3 below could be threshold concepts. Concepts in the first (left) column are basic concepts of marketing research, which students thought were important for gaining insight into the subject of market research. Students also thought these concepts were easy to understand. Concepts in the second (right) column were considered to be counter-intuitive but not as important as those in the left column. These concepts in the right column are concerned with statistical data analysis.

Table 3: Key concepts identified as potential threshold concepts for marketing research

Marketing research process	Measures of dispersion
Management decision problem	Inferential analysis
Marketing research question	Confidence intervals
Quantitative research design	Hypothesis testing
Qualitative research design	Analysis of association
Exploratory research design	Cross tabulation
Descriptive research	Correlation
Measures of central tendency	

Further studies are recommended to determine whether or not these concepts possess the characteristics of threshold concepts outlined earlier in this paper.

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