

Commentary on “Business-to-Business Marketing Textbooks: A Comparative Review”

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ABSTRACT. This commentary applauds the efforts made by Professor Backhaus and his colleagues in their review of current textbooks utilized to teach business-to-business marketing. It then discusses the notion of education as a process and attempts to stimulate thinking on the how business marketing academics can improve our educational efforts by applying continuous improvement process thinking and the theory of constraints to the teaching of business marketing. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Professor Backhaus and his colleagues have done an excellent job in examining textbooks currently available, primarily in the United States, for use as tools in both graduate and undergraduate instruction in business marketing. The authors note the importance of the book as a teaching tool and make a major contribution by applying Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) of learning outcomes types to the examination of the textbook as a teaching tool. Arguably, this taxonomy is the major theoretical under-

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pinning in the education research field and as noted by the authors, its relevance is clear in terms of its continued usage in developing educational programs and in research. The authors group the seven textbooks into three groups of five, one, and one textbooks respectively. They note that all books provide content, the first group of five books having the most comprehensive content. Also all books provide some the instructor some assistance in the development of higher-level cognitive skills. They also provide some very interesting descriptive comments on the ability of the books to provide specific themes of knowledge. They do note that no book provides all the educational criteria. Finally, they suggest that there may be room for a text that is structured along the lines of transaction or relationship types, rather than the standard marketing management approach that all seven books basically employ. We will come back to that suggestion later.

The purpose of this comment is not to criticize or debate the presentation, but to start extending the authors work by taking it to another level. This author appreciates the contribution that Professor Backhaus and his colleagues have made and seeks to extend their work and to engender some debate. The critical contribution seems to me to be the application of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and the application of those types or levels of learning to the textbook and the ability of the textbook to support those types or levels of learning. The extension I hope to convince readers I am making is to realize that education is a process, not much different than many other processes undertaken by people, assembling an automobile, writing up a purchase order, or millions of other processes consisting of sets of activities which are somehow linked into what we define as a process. Therefore, as in all other processes this author is familiar with, the development of the textbook for a course, needs to start with the vision of the learning process, not just for that course, but for the education in general. Since a course like business marketing can be included in many different learning situations, undergraduate degree programs, graduate degree programs, continuing education of various types, I will focus my comments on the undergraduate situation. I recognize that the position I am taking is controversial, but what I hope to do is to stimulate further debate among our colleagues and while many may not agree with all my assertions, and my position may ultimately prove to be non favored by most of my colleagues, I think that the debate it might stimulate will ultimately improve both course development and textbook development.

Industrial or business marketing has always been something of a stepchild. Even though early textbooks date back to the 1930s, the exis-

tence of business marketing as a field of study has come under attack in the past (Fern and Brown 1984), and continues to occupy what appears to be a very minor place in most marketing curriculums. In schools that offer business marketing at the undergraduate as an elective it is mostly a single elective course, with few exceptions. For example, Lichtenthal and Butaney (1991) estimate that fully $\frac{1}{2}$ of all business school graduates begin their careers with business marketing firms, yet less than 2% of them had business marketing in their curriculum. Discussion of undergraduate curriculum issues in business marketing in the marketing literature is also not deemed very important as only a few authors have talked about content, the most complete discussion being the aforementioned piece by Lichtenthal and Butaney. These authors do a thorough job of discussing what they believe the course should consist of, what concepts need to be applied, what skills need to be learned and what pedagogical tools can be used.

The past 10-15 years has seen some real changes in business practices. The continuing information technology advances, the continuing shrinking of the globe, and movements such as increasing quality, integrating functional activities and the notion of the supply/value chain has had dramatic impacts on how organizations do business. Anderson (2000), for one, suggests how these activities are changing how business is done, what skills are needed and even the potential role of business school education in dealing with these changes.

Perhaps one of the major changes in the past 10-15 years has been the increasing focus on business processes and their improvement. Not that this is exactly a new idea, it started off as time and motion studies, was called short interval scheduling in the 1970s and has since been broadened in focus and called business process reengineering. In all cases the focus is to understand some process at some level of abstraction and to use that information to improve that process. While a number of contributions have been made over the years, a major recent contributor is Eli Goldratt (Goldratt and Cox 1992). His classic book, *The Goal*, outlines his theory of constraints in a business novel outlining the trials and tribulations of one Alex Rogo and his team of manufacturing personnel who use the principles of the theory of constraints to turn an unprofitable plant into one that makes money. The general focus is on throughput with the efforts made to decrease inventory and operating expenses.

The theory of constraints is grounded in systems theory and has a number of perspectives. For example, Cooper and Loe (2000) have used the specific problem solving methodology of the theory as a teaching tool to get students to identify the core problem and work into solu-

tions. It has seen substantial debate in the accounting literature (Ruhl 1997; Kee 1995; Fritzch 1997-98), especially as theory of constraints relates to activity based costing, and has many other applications in virtually every functional area of business as well as in general management areas such as managing projects (Steyn 2001). I would not argue that the theory of constraints is necessarily widespread and ubiquitous, or well understood, but it has been explored in many contexts.

The fundamental point of the theory of constraints is simply that each and every process has a constraint in it that limits the ability of that process to reach the goal. For example, in the book *The Goal* the problems are defined in terms of cycle time, the time it takes to complete the process and the cost to produce the product. The firm has just completed the installation of robotics in one part of the process, but was not seeing throughput, that is the total cycle time and costs were not dropping. The lesson to the reader is simply that the expenditures were made on a part of the process, which did not lead to improvements of the total process and therefore were ineffective. As the reader progresses through the book they learn how to identify where the constraints are and how to deal with them. They also learn that dealing with one constraint only means that some other constraint exists so that process improvement is typically a journey, not something with finite beginning and ending points. The reader also quickly learns the problems with defining processes problems narrowly, as in the robotics example, and recognizes that while it is useful to break up a process into manageable pieces, one must always examine the big picture to assess true benefits.

My fundamental argument that I am asking the reader to consider is that education is a process. As such, the notion of process improvement and the use of theory of constraints have application in our endeavors as well. Perhaps the first issue is to examine how education as a process is similar and different from other processes, like putting an automobile together on the assembly line. One piece of the education process is a business-marketing course; one piece of assembling an automobile is attaching the starter motor to the engine. Both consist of a set of activities linked together. Both are pieces of an overall larger system or process. It seems to me that the primary difference is in the people involved. By that I mean in the automobile assembly operation the value is created by an assembler who connects one inanimate object, a starter, to another, an engine. In the educational example we have a person, a professor who is trying to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes to a student who clearly is not an inanimate object.

Process improvement has two very important constructs that drive it. One is synchronization and the other is standardization. In the automotive example it is important to put the starter in at the correct time in the process and to synchronize it with other parts of the overall process. Put it in too early and you may have to take it back out to put something else in. One of the basic rules of processes is that if law does not require it, or the customer is not willing to pay for it, why are you doing it. Standardization is also an important construct. Quality has many definitions and examples, but a simple way of looking at it is to consider design quality and build quality. In the automotive example we can design quality both in terms of the materials used and the processes used to assemble those materials. But we still have to execute those processes. If, for example, the starter is required to be torqued to a particular spec and the assembler ignores that, you the buyer of that new car may find, 3 days after taking delivery, that your starter is dragging on the highway making an awful noise. That is a build quality defect caused by the assembler not following procedures regarding putting in the starter. For that particular example the standardized process was not followed and resulted in a quality defect.

What I am arguing is that education, as a process, also needs to consider standardization and synchronization. And it needs to consider this from both the perspective of the individual course and major and the overall process of education.

Lets begin by asking some basic questions about the overall role of education at the undergraduate level. Without getting into the debate about the role of education, which has been going on as long as formal education has existed, we first need to consider as concretely as possible the overall goals of education and how our specific program will meet those goals and, of course, who we will measure them. All AACSB business schools in the US are mission driven and have thus gone through this thinking process. Part of that process is the development and ongoing improvement of the structure of the curriculum that defines in concrete terms the nature of the knowledge skills and attitude/values that should be the outcome of the process. At a macro level, the activities of this process of delivering the curriculum are the courses and important questions that need to be resolved are simply how do we synchronize and standardize them. I am sure most of my colleagues have gone through the standardization debate at some level of abstraction, for example, the use of the same textbook or not for the marketing principles course. At Western Michigan University we have a standard syllabus, which defines the core knowledge areas and to a lesser extent, skills and attitude/values and our

expectation is that instructors will at least deliver in some form the core knowledge areas. However, there are no measures. My perception is that most marketing departments have had similar debates and there is a wide range of standardization being practiced, from none to much more structured environments. My perception is that in other parts of the world, there is on average more structure.

I believe that synchronization is an issue that is much less considered. Our colleagues in accounting consider this issue extensively as much of accounting builds on previously knowledge. However in the marketing discipline I believe, and I am not aware of any empirically based knowledge, this is considered rarely by most faculties and when it is, it is superficial. In fact, I would argue that many faculty members might not even be aware of what their colleagues are teaching, even in the same course.

At the business marketing course level, the concepts of synchronization and standardization are equally important. Standardization comes into play whenever there is more than one section and given the lack of popularity of business marketing as a discipline and a course, this is probably not much of an issue in most institutions that offer the course. However, synchronization is much more of an issue. For most institutions that offer the course it needs to be thought through in terms of how does the course contribute to the outcome goals at various levels, and given that how should it be designed and delivered. Not just with other marketing courses, but the core courses in other disciplines, notably accounting and finance which, arguably constitute the language of business.

The textbook is a tool. As you will recall, Professor Backhaus and his colleagues suggested that a transaction or relationship focus might be a better or at least alternative focus for the textbook. The reader familiar with Reid and Plank (2000) would probably suggest that this author would agree with that suggestion. My own argument is simply that the two most important constructs in any business marketing course are how business customers value purchases and thus make decisions and how they want to relate to the company as well as personal relationships with supplier company personnel. I would argue that the crux of business marketing revolves around those two issues and therefore any book that through its focus provided the student with the knowledge, skills and attitudes corresponding with those goals, I would be in favor of. However, those colleagues who define the goals of the course differently and the linkages with the other parts of the educational process differently, are going to come to different conclusions. The key point is that we go through the process, not necessarily that each university who offers a program or course agrees.

In developing a textbook we not only have to consider synchronization within our discipline, but also from the perspective of other disciplines. While it is my perception that all of the business marketing texts have given some consideration to this, all could be much more explicit. As instructors I wonder if the reader is as frustrated as I am with having to teach some basic accounting or financial concepts, for example, because the student either has not had them or does not remember them. The former is caused by lack of standardization and the latter by the fact that students are not inanimate objects and learn differently as well as more or less than their fellow students. By being more explicitly synchronous or integrative a textbook could provide an important service to all of us teaching the business-marketing course.

One final note. I think it is important to consider how one would implement this kind of thinking and to recognize the “sacred cow” it attacks. In the United States we have this concept called academic freedom. While an official definition is published and available, the interpretation and understanding of that concept is almost as varied as there are faculty. When you formally and objectively examine education as a process with the goal to standardize and synchronize the process, given the limits of our students, you effectively suggest that our notion of academic freedom is somewhat narrow. You agree as a group of faculty to pursue certain goals, to standardize certain aspects of the curriculum and to synchronize the process and to develop and use measures to judge how well you are doing. To faculty who define academic freedom very broadly this is, in a word, repugnant. And, there are risks. As has been argued by Plank, Minton, and Blackshear (1997) in a sales process improvement context, one does not want to standardize or synchronize out the creativity that is so important in delivering a high quality education experience.

In conclusion, I hope the preceding discussion generates some further discussion and further thinking. I firmly believe that education is a process, much like any other process and would argue that the discussion needs to revolve around similarities and differences of the process we are involved with versus others that have been successful and continuously improved. What is in question is not the issue that education is a process, or that processes need to be improved, but rather how does what we have learned in other contexts about processes and improvement apply or not apply to our context. The key to get answers is to ask the right questions and while these may not be the right questions, we need to explore them and then continue on to answer these or other more relevant questions.

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