Bridging the Gap: The Case for Expanding Ethnographic Techniques in the Marketing Research Curriculum

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Abstract
This article challenges the content of most marketing research courses whereby students are indoctrinated into the qualitative-then-quantitative archetype commonly found in scholarly research, under the assumption that it is both sufficient and appropriate when equipping students with the necessary skills for business. By following this standard format, where discussion of qualitative research methods is usually limited to focus groups and depth interviews, academics are potentially penalizing students and their future employers by providing them with a restricted set of abilities. Are we producing a generation of future marketing managers who rather than embracing the possibilities for deep understanding will instead limit themselves to the mainstream? In the article the authors consider the value and viability of introducing ethnographic techniques into the marketing research curriculum to complement existing qualitative methods and provide four examples to demonstrate this. The authors do not negate the need for marketing courses to continue to teach students the “basics” of marketing research but rather challenge the idea that this archetype provides all the necessary skills. If marketing educators are to truly equip students for future roles as decision makers in business, the authors recommend that ethnography must be considered a viable alternative method of marketing research.

Keywords
experiential learning techniques, creativity/creative problem solving, employer needs, observational studies, marketing research, undergraduate education, doctoral education, MBA

The issue of how to make the marketing curriculum relevant to students, the majority of whom will enter the corporate environment, has been debated for decades (Chonko, 2004; Keegan, 2007; Luck, 1949) with little resolution in sight. In this article, we consider the delivery of marketing research skills to both undergraduate and graduate students. The standardized format has been a blend of quantitative and positivistic methods usually preceded by a few exploratory techniques; the assumption being that this is what students need to receive a well-rounded understanding of marketing research. These days scholars and practitioners challenge this notion in favor of increasing the influence of interpretive approaches to understand a world that cannot necessarily be broken down into a set of numbers (Chadwick, 2006; Goldsmith, 2004). Marketers are aware of the role that qualitative research could play in optimizing the returns on their efforts (de Ruyter & Scholl, 1998). In addition to the demands of understanding the “what,” “where,” “when,” and “who” of the research question, it is important to recognize that businesses also want to know the “why” and “how,” which only insightful qualitative results can produce (Gordon, 2006; Wolf, 2011). Marketing research agencies have responded to this demand, offering a wider range of research methodologies to their clients (de Ruyter & Scholl, 1998; Gordon, 2006). A comfortable marriage of qualitative and quantitative methodologies has ensued, with each providing a complementary service. But are business schools delivering graduates who have the ability to understand, if not meet, these demands in terms of their skill sets? Are we producing a generation of future marketing managers who, rather than embracing the possibilities for deep understanding will instead limit themselves to the mainstream?

The temptation is for academics to develop marketing research curricula which reflect their own needs and competences for scholarly research rather than those of industry (Brinberg & Hirschman, 1986; Kover, 1976). This is not

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surprising, given the importance that is placed on publication in academic journals when determining the remuneration and career development of academics possibly to the detriment of developing both professional practice and the student learning experience (Euwals & Ward, 2005; Polonsky & Whitelaw, 2005). To bring about the changes needed if we are to narrow the gap between the needs of academia and industry, we must consider the manner in which we train the marketing executives of the future.

Teaching Marketing Research

The duality of this position, that is, whether we are training the academic researchers of the future or future marketing executives, makes this a conundrum for the delivery of marketing research courses. A review of the syllabi of 40 marketing research courses revealed a ratio of 7:1 quantitative content compared with qualitative content; the industry ratio according to the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research annual report on the marketing research industry was 4:1. The topics covered under qualitative research were, in the main, limited to focus groups and depth interviews with little discussion of other techniques. Of these syllabi only 8 made mention of ethnography or ethnographic techniques, although as we discuss later, it is of growing importance in the repertoire of marketing research agencies and their clients. The syllabi were sourced from a wide range of different universities around the globe, including Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, the Wharton School, Berkeley, and Stanford from the United States; Middlesex, Newcastle, and Westminster Universities from the United Kingdom; and the Universities of New South Wales, Western Sydney, Western Australia, Otago, and Auckland from the Australasian region. The selection of this group was primarily based on availability of the information and an assurance that they were a recognizable institution.

Consequently, we argue that the marketing discipline is not keeping up with the rapidly changing marketing environment. Hughes, Tapp, and Hughes (2008) go so far as to suggest that too much weight on scientific rigor has been at the expense of developing students’ problem-solving skills and it seems that many syllabi confirm this. This is not to say that this matter is being ignored. Scholars (Ankers, 2004; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005) have suggested that debate should continue into how marketing research is taught and whether it marries up with what is applied in the business environment (Bovinet, 2007; Deshpande & Zaltman, 1984) and, moreover, whether students benefit via a practical, consultancy approach in experiential learning (Ardley & Taylor, 2010; Petkus, 2010). But too many scholars appear to ignore an important facet of the problem—that is, expanding the content of marketing research courses to adapt to the needs of the corporate world (Chadwick, 2006; Keegan, 2007). It is not only the way in which students are taught that is important (Diamond, Koering, & Iqbal, 2008; Wright, Bitner, & Zeithaml, 1994) but also what they are taught. A review of 10 of the leading marketing research textbooks, as outlined in Table 1, was undertaken to determine the topics included with specific emphasis on the length and content of those chapters containing quantitative content versus those with qualitative information. As with our review of marketing research syllabi this reveals that the majority reflect the academic approach with any discussion of qualitative techniques, beyond interviews, surveys, and focus groups, being limited to a few paragraphs at most. Only one (Cooper & Schindler, 2008) included several pages focusing on the nuances of observation techniques and then in relation to including this within ethnography.

Herein lies the challenge we put forward—how do researchers know what is a “true” picture of the world unless they know what it looks like (Kerr & Schultz, 2010)? As instructors, how can we produce graduates who have the ability to recognize the limitations of traditional marketing research techniques?

If the curriculum is to reflect the practice and needs of marketers, then other research methodologies need to be explored, particularly complimentary qualitative skills beyond the traditional focus group and depth interviews. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the feasibility of expanding an already crowded curriculum to include new topics. Rather than a complete upheaval of what is taught, we recommend incorporating techniques that we have found sit comfortably alongside the more traditional business school approaches. In this instance, we refer to ethnographic approaches to marketing research.

Ethnography

As described by Marshall (1998), “Ethnography is the act of observing directly the behavior of a social group and producing a description thereof” (p. 158). It is an umbrella term that covers a range of family of techniques and methods that have the potential to capture data occurring within natural environments from multiple viewpoints (Hunter-Jones, 2012). It has been suggested that ethnography provides the medium through which social scientists can build their idea of reality from the viewpoint of the “actors” involved. By becoming part of these actors’ conversations and interpretations, the researcher can gain a deep understanding of the social phenomenon that is being examined (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch 2003).

Ethnography stems from recognition that time in the field allows for the depth and intricacies of social structure to emerge (Jeffrey & Tromans, 2004), an area where organized surveys are inadequate. Critics of this method argue that this implies that if “true” meanings are to be uncovered, then researchers must be able to spend long periods of time immersed in their field of study, a luxury that is rarely
available within the structure of marketing research courses. Rather than seeing ethnography as a continuum with a non-participant (observer) at one end and complete immersion at the other (Agafonoff, 2006; Gold, 1958), many academics see it as demanding full engagement in a distant culture (Park, 1938). To do less, they argue, would make a mockery of the outcome.

It is possible to say that ethnographic projects are never actually finished—just put on hold once the researcher determines enough data have been collected. Wolcott (1995) suggests that the “ideal” time in the field is 2 years or at least brief visits over a longer period. Although this may be feasible for some academic studies, it is rarely possible in a commercial context, where research is tied to much shorter deadlines and there are cost restraints. In a classroom context for the average business student to spend days, weeks, and possibly months in the field collecting data is inconceivable. For the average business student to spend days, weeks, and possibly months in the field collecting data is inconceivable. Over the years, there have been varying proposals to overcome these constraints (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004); however, general perceptions about the heavy time requirement of ethnography persist.

If qualitative research methods become the point of differentiation within marketing research, as the traditional quantitative methods of modeling struggle to adapt to a
changing world, then ethnography must surely be an avenue of opportunity (Leeflange & Wittink, 2000). As noted by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), following this progression is the “ethnographies of marketing,” where the specifics of marketing orientation and how it affects the wider social framework becomes the tool with which this gap can be filled. Ethnographic research can, according to the former Chairman and CEO of Procter & Gamble, A. G. Lafley, “lead to richer consumer insights, which helps identify innovation opportunities that are often missed by traditional research” (Riedel, 2011). Sunderland and Denny (2007) recommend that ethnography is seen as an epistemic orientation rather than as a method. From this perspective, ethnography is a methodological approach that researchers use to gain culturally and socially ground knowledge. This adds to the research possibilities open to both commercial researchers and students who study these phenomena.

Ethnography also assists in addressing two inherent issues of marketing research—the limitations of asking people a set of questions (Mariampolski, 1999) and the fact that people do not always do what they say (Fellman, 1999). Moreover, answers that rely on recall or presumed behavior can be fraught with unintentional and, in some cases, intentional misrepresentations.

So if ethnography has the possibility to reveal a far more “accurate result,” why is it that it seems to play such a small role in the teaching of marketing research? Is it a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers? Is it due to the perceived requirement for the researcher to put in more effort because of the increased participation? The answers to these questions are unclear but should include the following discussion.

The first sticking point is data interpretation. If one of the benefits of ethnography is the ability to achieve insightful descriptions, and capturing this is often dependent on prolonged contact with the research subjects usually involving months of fieldwork, compared with the minutes or hours required for other methods (Wägar, 2012), then neither of these aspects are generally found within the typical marketing education course. It is much easier to teach students to run a statistical package that neatly classifies all the information into a meaningful format that, more often than not, has been taught in an earlier statistics course. Few, if any, students come to a marketing research course with the required skills for observational and interpretive analysis that is required for ethnographic techniques.

Likewise, running a focus group or depth interview in a “contained” environment offers the researcher much more control than that seen in a naturalistic setting. Students can see the logic in being able to read and review the transcripts and/or view the focus group video to note who talks the most, how many topics were discussed, who tended to talk to the person next to them rather than the moderator, and so on.

However, for most academics, results from ethnographic research often lead to an additional myriad of questions about the phenomena under investigation, such as the following: What should a student “measure” if he or she is thrust into a “live” setting and asked to observe and (possibly) interact as part of the research? Given how one person sees the world can be very different to another’s point of view (Cagen & Vogel, 1999), how do you determine what is important and what is not? On top of that, is it possible to give the average business student the skills to solve such problems within the course of his or her degree? Surely these skills can only be learnt over a longer period of time (Walsh, 2011), which the nature of ethnography can provide, so that the information collected is meaningful and reflective.

Second, the cost of ethnographic studies can be prohibitive (Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003). Marketing graduates who propose projects that run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars would not be viewed favorably by businesses. Apart from the cost issue, it is also not practical for many business professionals to live with their research subjects, and this, traditionally, has been an underlying premise of ethnography. In response, researchers have implemented a range of different techniques to develop outcomes as effective as if they did have the opportunity to “immerse” themselves in the topic under study (Walsh, 2011). This is the nontraditional ethnographic approach, often referred to as “quasi-ethnography” (Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003; Ezan, 2009), where the investigator uses a blend of observation, depth interviews, video imagery, rapid assessments, casual interactions, and participant diaries to build a story within a shorter time frame.

As with other research methods, ethnographic techniques continue to develop. From the teaching perspectives, we consider the following to offer exciting opportunities for introducing ethnographic methods into the marketing research curriculum. First “auto-ethnography” (Trujillo, 1999), sometimes known as subjective personal introspection (Holbrook, 2006), allows researchers to write up their own experiences via critical enquiry embedded in theory. As used in branding and advertising research, auto-ethnography enables researchers to draw on their own subjective insights within an objective, observable, context (Hackly 2007). Auto-ethnography overcomes problems of decontextualization and artificiality found with focus groups and depth interviews within a timeframe that is available to the researcher (McIvveen, 2008). Within an educational context it also has the added benefit of encouraging students to become reflexive of their own behavior.

“Netnography” as used by Kozinets (2002) describes a technique that uses online communities to monitor consumption, online behavior, and the interactions of these groups. To monitor online communities in this manner is less obtrusive and quicker than traditional methods but does allow the researcher to enter into the community and if relevant...
participate. This technique recognizes the increasing importance of online communities to marketers.

Third, “rapid ethnographic appraisal” acknowledges that time is a limiting factor in undertaking traditional ethnographic studies and recommends instead a series of shorter ethnographic encounters. These are usually captured on video and combined with data from other sources, typically depth interviews, participant observation, contextual observations, literature reviews, and even surveys, to provide culturally grounded consumer insights within a much shorter time frame (Lampi, Squires, & Johnsrud, 2004; Whitehead, 2004).

Finally, technology has added to the advantages of ethnography. The advent of small hand-held video cameras, digital still cameras, digital voice recorders, and smartphones all provide an avenue in which to capture “live” data. A variety of these have been used to capture in-store behavior (Spanjaard, Freeman, & Young, 2009), home meals (Heisley & Levy, 1991), and family archives (Holbrook, 2006). The argument that collecting ethnographic data is heavily reliant on researcher’s note-taking becomes weak if there is real-world evidence provided.

Even as these improvements in ethnographic techniques continue, there is one overarching drawback that must be considered—replication (LeComte & Schensul, 2010). As the “natural environment” is a positive aspect of ethnography so is it a potential disadvantage. With many extraneous variables at play, it could be said that replicating behavior can be fraught with potential errors should the exact circumstances not be available. This can, in part, be overcome by research design, but ultimately it becomes a fine balance between achieving the desired “naturalism” and allowing some researcher control to ensure validity. Research subjectivity not only during data collection but also during data analysis is the second potential disadvantage of ethnography. As highlighted in one of the following case studies, this can be minimized by the use of multiple researchers, with adequate training and the time necessary to complete the task.

**Ethnography and the Practice of Marketing**

Ethnography is a now a mainstay of the services offered by both multiservice and specialist marketing research agencies and has been proven to be an effective tool in uncovering shared realities (Agafonoff, 2006). This is echoed by Sunderland and Denny (2007), who find that there has been a “seismic shift” in the adoption of ethnography by market research agencies. Long held in the domain of health and social sciences research, we propose that researchers from all disciplines would benefit by including this in their repertoire of chosen methods (Cagen & Vogel, 1999; Wolf, 2011). If the goal for marketing is to understand customer behavior and all that this entails, then surely capturing this within a naturalistic environment is no longer a “soft” option. Although this is happening in the marketing research industry, researchers are often required to learn this skill “on the job” with very little formal training.

Increasingly companies require their employees to have some level of understanding as to how to commission and implement ethnography (Jordan & Yamauchi, 2008). A search of three of the major online recruitment websites, on March 9, 2012, found the following vacancies for ethnographers. The UK’s Jobrapido site had 24 vacancies of which 12 were in market research agencies, 2 in social media agencies, and a further 2 in the consumer insights divisions of fast moving consumer goods (FMGC) companies; SEEK in Australia showed a similar pattern with 18 vacancies for ethnographers of which 4 were in market research agencies and 2 within FMCG consumer insights divisions; in the United States Careerjet advertised 14 vacancies within market research agencies and a further 5 within FMCG divisions. An advertisement for a marketing research junior executive, found on the Careerjet site, asked for a “Bachelor of Science in Business, marketing or a related discipline, Master’s degree strongly preferred . . . experience in qualitative research methods including focus groups, ethnography, and usability testing.”

For most companies, their markets are dynamic environments where the time taken to do a fully immersive ethnography is a luxury that they do not have. In the 2 or 3 years that such a study would take, the market will have changed (Denny, 2006). What manufactures need is access to techniques that are time appropriate but will still deliver the crucial cultural and social insights they are seeking (Ehn & Lofgren, 2009).

Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) argue that the primary challenge in the commercial use of ethnography is the need to educate marketers of “its true value, appropriate usage and limitations” (p. 222). We argue that this is not happening at the foundations of learning for business novices. Students need to know how to conduct research that reflects the importance of culture and content in consumer behavior as a complement to the more usual qualitative skills.

**Why Is Ethnography Not Being Taught in Detail?**

The challenge for the student in learning ethnographic techniques lies in the emphasis that has been placed on positivistic methods of data collection and analysis in earlier stages of their degree. Ingrained in this approach is the belief that empirical data are objective and relatively easy to manage within the educational environment. To get students to appreciate the value of “thick description” (Geertz, 2000), despite the supposed complexity in obtaining the data, is the educator’s challenge. Even in courses and textbooks where some element of ethnography is incorporated, emphasis is
frequently on the collection of data by an outsider and the objective observation of a behavior with little discussion if any of the analysis of such data. Instruction on the analysis of such data rarely goes beyond counting incidences. As Jordan and Yamauchi (2008) found, “Learning ethnographic data collection is comparatively unproblematic. Learning ethnographic analysis is hard” (p. 3).

Perhaps it is this latter aspect that restricts the teaching of ethnography or at least ethnographic methods in the classroom. When compared with ethnography communicating the notion of depth interviews is comparatively straightforward, after all we ask questions and interpret the responses throughout out life, prompting where we have received insufficient data. We believe that it is possible to teach students the benefit of multiview analysis within the context of their course and as such, we present four case studies as examples. Each one represents a different level of learning from undergraduate to higher degree research. Given the fluidity in the nature of the methods applied to these cases, we have not applied a theoretical framework but instead acknowledge an experiential learning approach. This has been recognized as an appropriate means of increasing student experience and knowledge formation, particularly in real-life scenarios (Mihelic, Lipicnik, & Juntez, 2010). It has also been used previously as a means to test the output of several ethnographic learning situations and as such is relevant for our work presented here (Trujillo, 1999).

We demonstrate this learning approach, by reference to these four studies, where nontraditional ethnographical methods have been successfully developed alongside the teaching of the more traditional research methods. The results can supply additional insights that hold and develop students’ interest. In most cases, the ethnographic element was one part of a larger project and ethnographic techniques were applied to an everyday activity—furniture shopping, coffee drinking, club membership, or grocery shopping. A tabular comparison of the four cases can be found in Table 2. Although the more conventional methods provided solid results with which to develop a “story,” it was the ethnographic outcomes that gave far greater insight into the how and why of consumer behaviors.

**Case Studies**

**Study 1: A Third Year Undergraduate Marketing Research Subject**

In this subject, students were expected to undertake a “real-world” business project for a client. Although the whole class, comprising 38 students, worked on the project, students were placed in smaller groups that worked in cooperation with each other during the data collection phase of the research. The benefits of using ethnography within team teaching has been previously noted as providing a collaborative environment with the potential for richer data and greater diversity of analysis, hence resulting in greater learning opportunities (Trujillo, 1999).

In this case the project centered on a furniture retailer who wanted to understand the role that the retail outlet played during the decision-making process for consumers when buying furniture.

The students developed a research design that included traditional focus groups and a survey but also had quasi-ethnographic components—nonparticipant observation. This combination fostered the ability to employ rapid ethnographic appraisal in the analysis (Agafonoff, 2006; Lampi et al., 2004). Prior to going into the field, seminars and workshops gave the students a chance to develop their observation skills and approaches to their data analysis. Throughout the training period, students were encouraged to think about the questions that they were trying to answer, particularly in terms of the interaction between the consumer and the context (Evans, 2012). Over a period of 4 weeks, the students were rostered on for a minimum of six 4-hour observation periods. Students monitored the in-store behavior of people visiting three of the retailer’s outlets. The behaviors of particular interest were the following: time spent, time of day, length and frequency and type of any interaction with sales staff, interaction with price tags and other promotional literature, number of items looked at, and the social characteristics of visitors (Rust, 1993). The students did not attempt to be covert in their data collection; rather, they positioned themselves in the main sales areas with clipboards. On those occasions, when a member of the public approached a student, the student explained that they were undertaking a university project. Notices clarifying this were also placed near the entrance and at the till. Students observing any in-store conversations between sales staff and customers followed up on the nature of the conversation with the sales person as soon as the customer left the store. If a transaction took place, students took note of this but did not observe the actual payment. As they left the store, customers were invited to fill out a questionnaire that included an invitation to participate in further research into this topic by agreeing to either an at home depth interview or to participate in a focus group.

All students were trained in the importance of ethical conduct of marketing research and the guidelines that relate to observing members of the public without their knowledge. Subsequent results identified distinct in-store behavioral patterns, including the following: lone shoppers rarely purchased but returned later with other family members; when in a group, fewer items were examined but there was more interaction with sales staff. Analysis of body language also gave some insight as to the emotional state of customers (Spanjaard et al., 2009). These observations became the foundation for the moderator guidelines for the ensuing focus groups and depth interviews. Participants from both...
confirmed that when purchasing for the family home, preliminary in-store research was usually conducted alone, as a way to reduce the consideration set.

Other results indicated that during this initial search stage, salespeople were considered to be annoying if they approached the customer, yet the reverse was true when the purpose of the visit was to make a purchase. Single customers exhibited fewer emotional states than those who visited with others. This was later supported by the group and interview findings that shopping for furniture alone was fun, but it becomes stressful when accompanied by a partner or families, where compromises have to be made between all participants. The results also highlighted that more visitors took a catalogue on leaving the store than on entering, and the focus groups revealed that this catalogue was used as an “aide memoir” rather than as a promotional tool. As a final step, the survey research gave data as to the demographics and past purchasing behaviors of the current customers. By combining the data sets produced by different research techniques, the client received insight into the actual behaviors of their customers and did not have to rely on customer recall, memories of which are frequently flawed (Elliott & Jenkel-Elliott, 2003).

Each student was also required to maintain and submit a reflective journal of their experience throughout the course and which formed a small part of their grades. These autoethnographic reflections encouraged students to consider both their own skill development and the contribution that each component of the research added in addition to their own interpretations of the findings. Overall this assignment has contributed to my learning process through demonstrating the real life complexities and problems that arise through client project work such as client expectations and differing opinions. (Paul, an undergraduate marketing major in his final semester who had acted as client liaison for the class)

Apart from aiding student learning, reflective journals had the further benefit of enabling the instructors to go beyond the usual survey-based student evaluation processes and review
the insights the journals gave in determining future directions for the subject (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011).

Analysis of the reflective journals demonstrated that although there was some initial resistance to the number of visits each student was expected to make to the store, their argument being that they would only see more of the same after the fourth or fifth visit, many students commented that it had been interesting because their focus changed from seeing the behaviors that were common to seeing the exceptions.

My group felt that we shouldn’t have to go out to Parramatta (the store location) that often, but in the end it was worth it; you could see different things going on and it was a different crowd at the weekends. When we talked about what we had seen I realized that time did matter. (Sheila, an undergraduate exchange student from Singapore)

There were also problems with developing a roster that ensured that each student did his or her share of the research. This was overcome by having a substantial part of the available marks for the management of the research process and also a peer evaluation framework in place.

The reflective journals also indicated that all the students felt that they had benefited from their exposure to a wide range of methodologies which most were convinced would be valuable to them in their careers. A typical extract from the journals comes from Chloe, a marketing major in her final semester.

The main learning that I take away with me is not just a heightened understanding of the efforts involved in qualitative research but also the importance of using it with other techniques; we learned so much from just watching what went on in the store.

Study 2: A Research Skills Subject for Honors Students and Undergraduates Taking a Major in Advanced Marketing Research

As a component of their research training, all marketing Honors students were expected to complete an advanced research skills course. Although the framework was inherently positivistic, students were instructed in a limited number of qualitative techniques, usually focused on developing their interviewing and analytical skill set.

In this example, the curriculum was extended to give a group of students the opportunity to incorporate other, ethnography based, techniques into their research. They chose to examine the role of coffee shops in the lives of young adults. Their preferred methodologies included auto-ethnography, observation, depth interviews, and unstructured interpretive group interviews where they shared their reflections of their own and others’ behaviors (Goulding & Saren, 2010). The outcomes gave them unique insight into their own perceptions of self and those of others. For example, students realized that for all the coffee was secondary to the situation. Indeed, several of the students confessed to disliking coffee, but they all valued the acceptability of going for a coffee as a means of social engagement or as “chill out time.” As one student recorded, “What I love is that if I say I’m going for a coffee nobody questions me.” It also allowed the development of a deep understanding of both individual and group behaviors. As they limited their observations to their own behavior and to that of others also undertaking the course, there were no ethical issues.

The auto-ethnographies revealed that the initial reaction of the students ranged from skepticism; they felt that they already knew why they went for coffee and they also knew each other so there would be little to learn, to delight at being able to select such an easy topic. On completion, they had a very different perspective on qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular. They were surprised by the amount of information that they generated and the quality of their insights when their observations were combined with their self-reflections. At the start of the process, the students all felt that they could design a questionnaire that would serve the same purpose, by the end they understood that to generate these deep culturally grounded consumer insights they needed to be able to draw on a range of techniques.

From a teaching perspective, one of the advantages of this project was the proximity and accessibility of the subjects of the study. The feedback we got from both the auto-ethnographies and the subject feedback surveys, conducted at the end of each semester, was that the students felt they had benefitted from their participation in the assignment in terms of their skill development and in their appreciation of the need to consider multiple approaches to problem solving. Two of the students who formed the group are now employed in the consumer insights divisions of major FMCG companies. The number of honors students now using multi-method approaches in their theses has subsequently doubled over previous year’s.

Study 3: A Project-Based Master of Business Administration Subject

This capstone subject allowed students to undertake a business project of their choice. The assessment was based on both their research skills and their ability to apply subsequent findings strategically. All the students had previously completed a minimum of one graduate-level marketing research course. In line with their training, most students opted to do a survey-based study with some preliminary exploratory qualitative or archival research. To broaden their choice of methodology, a series of voluntary workshops on ethnographic and other interpretive methodologies was offered.
Approximately one third of the students opted to participate in these workshops. All the students were required to keep a reflective journal throughout the semester. In their first class, students were required to complete a skills audit to determine their knowledge and self-efficacy across range of traditional marketing research skills and techniques. The students who took the optional workshops appeared to fall into three categories: those who felt confident in their research skills (quantitative with limited qualitative) and were looking to enhance them, those who lacked confidence in their quantitative abilities and hoped to avoid them, and finally a group who had a project in mind but felt that the skills they need to accomplish it were lacking.

A particularly successful project was conducted by a student who wished to develop a marketing strategy for a golf club. He had been a semiprofessional golfer and was looking forward to a new career as marketing manager for a recently opened club. As a part of this new role, he was planning to visit several clubs to see first-hand how they recruited and maintained their membership. After taking part in the workshops, he decided that instead of being an objective observer he would change his stance to that of a participant observer and become a member of the clubs that formed his sample. This enabled him to access their marketing literature, observe the membership, and experience first-hand their approach to converting an enquirer into a membership. Adopting autoethnography as his chosen methodology allowed him to incorporate his past experience into the research. In conjunction with a netnography of web-based marketing activities of clubs elsewhere and of golfing blogs, this gave him a well-grounded foundation for his subsequent marketing strategy. The use of netnography took him further into the golfing community than participant observation alone. This level of insight would not have been gained with interviews or focus groups alone.

The challenge from an instructor’s perspective is ensuring that the student is spending sufficient time in the field and was collecting the relevant information. In this case, as there was no video content to support the findings the student developed a series of data collection frames to be completed immediately after a visit. These evolved over the course of the research and findings from earlier visits were supplemented by reference to other data sources to ensure that missing items now deemed to be of importance were covered.

**Study 4: A Doctoral Thesis**

In this case, the research described formed one part of a larger study investigating consumer brand loyalty for grocery products. A mix of research methods was applied because it became obvious that each method on its own did not provide adequate answers to the research problem. Although it was possible to ask “why did you choose that brand” and “how did you feel about that choice,” it quickly became apparent that further insight or adding to existing knowledge would not be gained unless a combined methodology, in this case incorporating rapid ethnographic appraisal, was adopted.

Adopting a more positivistic stance would certainly have allowed the researcher to answer the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and even “how do you remember/think that you felt?” of grocery shopping, but to gain more insightful outcomes, a different lens to view both the data collection and analysis was needed.

What emerged was an organic process whereby one research method introduced the need for the next, thus providing a more complete ethnographic outcome. Although the initial research design was envisioned as a linear process to precisely capture a range of consumer decision-making processes, it became apparent that the result was not going to be so accommodating. A more iterative approach was needed and one that had the ability to allow back tracking between the methods, as each technique was compared with the outcome of the previous.

The focus of the exploration necessitated the gathering of both conscious and unconscious consumer behaviors during grocery shopping and factors that influenced decision making. Earlier stages of the research involved collecting generalized consumer purchasing patterns via empirical data. To compliment this, videography captured the observed grocery shopping behaviors of 16 participants during a routine trip to the supermarket. The location and timing of the recorded trips were in line with the details of their shopping habits that had been previously collected. The naturalistic setting of their regularly used supermarket, along with the use of the video camera, facilitated the capture of their behaviors.

A depth interview followed the videography to probe into the participants’ reasons behind their decisions. This approach enabled the researcher to compare in-store behavior patterns and to link both manifested emotional and rational indicators that resulted in a key finding for the study. That is, the influence of a “network effect” between the consumer and those close to them had a direct impact on the degrees of brand loyalty they exhibited. Such finding challenged current methods of measuring brand loyalty, showing that, in many ways, existing methods are too simplistic and do not always account for what has actually motivated consumers to choose a particular brand.

Throughout the data collection phase, there was a conscious awareness that to provide accurate results, it was important to capture multiple perspectives of the “life world” experience (Goulding, 1999), using a variety of tools for data collection (video, face-to-face, self-completion) undertaken at different times. These processes resulted in an emic perspective, in which the emotions felt by the participants were identified and articulated in their own terms and not predetermined by a research tool or by the preferences of the
researcher. Although the study of emotions within the marketing environment is not a new initiative, moving it away from the service environment or the manipulation of external influences, and concentrating on the less obvious, but just as important aspects of consumer decisions, provides substantial research possibilities.

What Did We, as Both Teachers and Researchers, Learn?

The focus of this article so far has been on the student learning experience. But what did we, as both teachers of these case studies and researchers in marketing education, learn? Arguments to introduce ethnography into the marketing research courses have been presented, with evidence of how this has contributed to the overall student experience. From the teaching perspective, we acknowledge that it is not as simple as updating the curriculum and moving a few topics around to “slot” in ethnography. When there is already so much for students to learn about the paradigm and too few weeks in which to deliver the relevant material, including more techniques is hard work. The learning of ethnography, more so than other qualitative techniques, is via experiential situations and requires the ongoing dedication of the academic to be the “champion” in order for it to be a success.

As part of this process, we realized that if ethnography is to be included in the curriculum, teaching staff must have the necessary experience that is not often found in text books, syllabus descriptions, or journal insights. They must have been exposed to the needs of the fieldwork, the data analysis, and the interpretation. Finding marketing academics who have designed surveys, run focus groups, or analyzed depth interview transcripts is far easier than finding those who have suitable ethnographic skills. The academics involved with the case studies presented are experienced commercial researchers who benefitted from being able to transfer their skills to the classroom. This poses one of the significant outcomes of this research, the raised awareness and importance of the ability to find and retain suitable academics who have the experience of ethnographic research and are able to teach it. Initially, we found that students were hesitant to accept this methodology. Although the majority were nearing completion of their degree, at all levels, they had not attained the relevant skill sets (in their eyes) to successfully carry out ethnographic research. It was perceived to be “safer” to do what had been read in detail in the text book. Through introducing ethnographic techniques, we moved the students out of their comfort zone, and by the end of their courses, the student feedback, both surveys and reflective journals, indicated that the majority were glad to have been pushed to these boundaries. Both graduate and undergraduate students felt they had learned more in applying this research method than if they had stuck to the qualitative–quantitative paradigm and that several of these newly acquired skills could be transferred to their future marketing careers.

As an undergraduate Malaysian exchange student, who worked on the first case, explained,

This subject has been an interesting and enjoyable experience, where it was not what I expected. Although I knew about the practical nature of the subject... I didn’t know that it would be so real. However tedious absorbing all of that information was at first later on everything was clearly seen in the picture. I was able to know what is going on and where I stand. This subject has been a great learning opportunity, to interact in a real life project in a real situation. It is the first subject I have done of this nature (in terms of the way it’s taught). It has been enjoyable and I can say I have learned quite a bit about consumers and being a real marketing person.

For an Honors student, who went on to complete a master’s degree by research with a strong ethnographic component, it brought about recognition of the plethora of research alternatives available. “I enjoyed the course and the different approaches presented. Yet I feel I have much more reading and analysis to undertake on this learning journey.”

We have come to realize the importance of giving support to students who go outside of their comfort zone. In addition to the workshops, we have established, for students of all levels, sets of online resources. Comprising videos, case studies, readings, and links to external sites, these have been selected to give students timely assistance and to reassure them that they are not alone in seeing the relevance of this methodology to marketers. Ideally, we would like to be in a situation where there was sufficient time to give all students a trial run, but as this is not feasible, within an already crowded curriculum, we are developing more in-class and online exercises to give students some experience of both data capture and analytic techniques prior to going into the field. Students, undergraduate and graduate, are also encouraged to come to us for a face-to-face debrief after their first forays into the field. This has had the benefit of encouraging them to reflect on their experiences and allows us to fine tune their data collection techniques.

Conclusions

We do not negate the need for marketing courses to continue to teaching students the “basics” of marketing research, but at the same time, we challenge the notion that this is all we need to teach to equip them with the necessary skills for business. In tandem with the technical and analytic skills required by industry, we must develop in our graduates, at all levels, an understanding of the contribution that complimentary research skills can make (Schlee &
Hatch, 2010; Trujillo, 1999). To facilitate this goal, we propose that marketing educators should consider the benefits of including ethnography at a more extensive level despite the challenges of implementing it. A further benefit of incorporating ethnographic techniques within the curriculum at a practical level is the degree of engagement it engenders within the students, thereby increasing the opportunities for them to develop problem-solving skills through practice-oriented learning (Bacon & Stewart, 2006; Diamond et al., 2008). A review of the reflective journals in various subjects highlighted high levels of involvement and their enhanced understanding of both the techniques employed and of qualitative research in general. This level of engagement is likely to result in our students achieving greater retention of their learning and enhanced recall (Bacon & Stewart, 2006), leading to an increase in self-efficacy when using qualitative marketing research techniques. Furthermore, technological and other developments have reshaped our understanding of the nature of ethnographic research, making its inclusion in the marketing curriculum even more feasible and desirable.

As discussed by Blomberg, Giacomi, Mosher, and Sweton-Wall (1993), to gain the most benefit from understanding human behavior, it is important to study it in a natural setting, to adopt a holistic view that behavior can only be understood in the context in which it occurs, and to ensure that there is representation of the participants’ point-of-view, that is, there is a need for descriptive understanding. Regardless of tradition and convenience, we believe that any marketing research curriculum should reflect this need and would benefit from incorporating ethnographic methods in their content; only then will students (and teachers) fully appreciate the benefits inherent in ethnography. We should be encouraging students to know how to use and not abuse ethnography, to understand its limitations, that it would not give deep psychological insights but rather reflects the importance of culture and context in consumer behavior.

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