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Critical Pedagogy for Business and Management Undergraduates: Evaluation of Marketing Information

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CHAPTER 18*

Critical Pedagogy for Business and Management Undergraduates

Evaluation of Marketing Information

Ilana Stonebraker, Caitlan Maxwell, and Jessica Jerrit

Introduction

Academic business schools recognize the importance of cultural diversity awareness in business education. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) requires business schools to demonstrate a commitment “to address, engage, and respond to current and emerging corporate social responsibility issues (e.g., diversity, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and globalization of economic activity across cultures) through its policies, procedures, curricula, research, and/or outreach activities” in order to get accreditation.¹ The types of assignments that business students typically work with, however, lack theoretical analysis of these issues. Most of these assignments do not require any type of critical

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analysis of ethical and social responsibility issues. The types of resources that business students typically need for these assignments are produced by commercial research companies, not scholars, and approach business issues primarily from the perspective of profit. If students are expected to address social responsibility, new perspectives need to be brought into assignment design.

When working with business students, librarians often give our perspective on where to find information produced by these companies, but we refrain from openly acknowledging the power constructs that underlie the collection and creation of business information. Activities that incorporate critical pedagogy are useful for business students because in their professional lives they will have to communicate with people who are not like them. This communication could take the form of designing a marketing strategy and campaign or making a deal with a business based in another country. Students visualize markets in terms of the four *Ps*: price, product, promotion, and place. We suggest additional *Ps* of power, privilege, and perspectives (or lack thereof). Business marketing education, for example, focuses on the gathering of demographics and characteristics of “consumers” without any acknowledgment of the power constructs that shape individual experiences.

The audiences for this lesson plan are undergraduates or graduates who work with marketing databases. It was first piloted with undergraduate business majors enrolled in a business information literacy credit-bearing course at a large Midwestern university. The lesson plan is meant for one 50-minute session in the course, which covers a variety of business information literacy topics including company research, industry results, scholarly articles, and more. The class had fifty students and met in an active learning classroom. All students were management or economics majors. They were mainly of sophomore or junior standing, with some seniors. The students take the course as a requirement, usually before they have entered into the upper division of the management school.

During the class activity, students are briefly introduced to the idea of semiotics and then asked to use their new knowledge to evaluate a market research report. In semiotics, how we interpret the world is not an objective truth, but the product of our cultural background and the time we live in. In this case the librarian used the example of a *Marketing to Moms* report. The data we collect on mothers is not objective truth, but rather a reflection of where we see mothers within society. The lesson plan also introduces a theoretical concept that helps students think more deeply about ethics and corporate social responsibility when analyzing a business problem.

Learning Outcomes

- Apply methods of critical reflection and practice to develop an awareness of marketing data and its part in a larger conversation about cultural power and privilege.
- Investigate one's own understandings of business information in order to collaboratively struggle with concepts of both business information literacy and social justice.

Materials

- Worksheet (see appendix 18A)
- Semiotics PowerPoint (see appendix 18B)
- Market research database: Mintel or other marketing database that deals with consumer behavior and demographics (examples: Who's Buying Books, Pew Internet Survey, Plunkett Research)
- Computers for students, and a computer with projector for the instructor

Preparation

Librarians who are less familiar with marketing resources may want to consult Celia Ross's book *Making Sense of Business Reference*.² Come up with a good example (such the *Marketing to Moms* example used here) that illustrates some of the points you will make. Since students will be using their laptops to navigate resources, printed handouts are preferred. Consider how the points you will touch on in this session will relate to their other assignments, internships, and life experiences, and be prepared to share those examples to help students understand the exercise. You should go through the handout beforehand to make sure that the marketing research database has not updated its reports.

In the example, students before class watched a video on marketing and industry information as well as a short video on how to use Mintel, the marketing research database that was used in this lesson plan. Students were instructed to bring laptops.

Session Instructions

1. Introduce the activity by making connections with other assignments, explaining that we have thought about information in a couple of different ways. Frame the activity in a way that makes sense for your class. For example, you might link the presentation to other activities or experiences

the students have had. Describe why some really good datasets often tailor to the majority without real subtlety.

2. Present the PowerPoint on Semiotics (three slides, see appendix 18B). The goal of the PowerPoint is to make students think more theoretically about the information they use in their work as businesspeople.
3. Introduce worksheet and tools. Give a quick introduction to Mintel or whatever market research database you are using for the workshop if there are parts of the activity that would require more work. For example, in this activity, we made sure students understood where they could find the “methodology” link for every report, which they had not used before. For this example, we used the *Marketing to Moms* report from Mintel as an example.³
4. Students work through the worksheet (see appendix 18A) using computers with the librarian circulating to answer questions. At first many students may have many questions about accessing the resources, such as finding the right tabs in the database. The first question on the worksheet involves improper sampling. A large sample size isn’t the only factor that determines the applicability of data. As students consider what sample size is sufficient, the worksheet also makes students consider whether they or people they know are reflected. For example, the data is very robust for some minorities but not others. Lastly, the worksheet asks students to look at themselves. But no matter how people are sampled, generalizations often hide true marketing data. Students may initially notice lots of individual bias. Reinforce that this activity requires looking beyond individual bias toward more systematic ways that minorities are treated.
5. As a wrap-up, ask the class: Did anything you found surprise you? Return to the idea of semiotics. Why should we be critical of marketing data? What were some of the assumptions made between behavior and attitude? In what ways might the assumptions of the report harm your potential company? In what ways could some of these assumptions be linked to historical perspectives? Positive reinforcement is important, but also make sure to challenge students who may be making blanket generalizations. They may be unaware of the consequences of their statements. For example, a student may reflect that perhaps it’s not important to be critical about marketing data: they believe they aren’t going to sell to ethnic groups because they only want to target luxury consumers. This student would need to be challenged in their assumption that ethnic consumers would not be part of their demographic.

Assessment

The worksheet has assessment and reflection questions at the end: What is one thing you learned from this activity? What is one thing you are still un-

clear about? We examined these questions to see what students articulated as important about the activity. In our case, the majority of students mentioned being able to look at a report critically as one of their takeaways.

The worksheet explicitly said the activity was not just about “bias,” but many students indicated in an assessment survey after the session that they were unclear about removing the “bias” they found in the Mintel reports at the end of the activity. One student wondered how to get a diverse enough pool of surveys to avoid the bias in the report without handpicking the population. Others were uncertain how to avoid bias especially when it came to customer preferences. These questions were not discussed during the debrief activity, but in the future the librarian may need to explicitly discuss to unpack the students’ understandings of “bias” as being an inherent property. In addition, three groups mentioned they liked navigating a market research report deeply, which they found to be a useful activity. Many business librarians don’t have a dedicated information literacy course. To incorporate critical theory concepts meaningfully into a one-shot, we believe it’s important to carefully identify courses where it might be most related to the course materials and to build relationships with the faculty who teach those courses. Ideally, critical theory should be scaffolded throughout individual courses and the overall curriculum for lasting impact on student learning and engagement. Meaningful relationships with our faculty can help us enter into these larger conversations.

Reflections

The librarian was not sure about how the students would respond as she had not taught in this method previously. Student response were overall very positive. One thing that needs reinforcement is the idea that the “bias” students found in the marketing report wasn’t something needing removal, but part of a larger conversation about information. This is a difficult concept to grasp in one class session. Perhaps a closing activity or follow-up activity may help the students understand that being critical isn’t just about doing away with things that are wrong, but a way to make informed, intentional research decisions.

Final Questions

When we discuss critical theory with business students, should we couch it in practical terms (here is how this can help you in the business world) or as a separate obligation? Are critically conscious capitalists a good thing? How is critical theory useful in the service of profit or business interests? Should it be used in this way?

Appendix 18A: Handout

Market Research Reports—Being Critical of Sources

Mintel is a good source for market research, but it's a good habit to be critical of even the most authoritative sources. This is not just because of “bias” but also because of the power we give certain types of information in our lives. Marketing data is part of a larger conversation in culture about what is important and what drives people to do things. Even evidence-based resources have cultural baggage and power structures that surround them. Advantages that Mintel has may be disadvantages for you in understanding your market fully. Think of yourself as a lawyer or detective, looking for clues to support your case against Mintel in how it may be misleading you to believe things that may not be true about your market.

1. Use Mintel to look up a market research report for your group project. You need to look up only the one that deals with your project.
 - Vitamins, Minerals and Supplements—US—September 2014
 - Soap, Bath and Shower Products—US—February 2015
 - Pet Food—US—July 2014
2. Look at the report and see if you can find the methodology. How were the participants surveyed? How might that change the responses? How many men and women were surveyed? How about income, ethnicity, and race? How might that change the results?
3. Look through the “Race and Hispanic Origin” section of the report. Think about the concept of intersectionality, meaning that people derive their identity by many different attributes from their hobbies, their ethnicity, and their upbringing, such as “Biracial,” “Monster Truck Fan,” “Professor,” etc. How does this section address or not address intersectionality? Is it important in looking at your marketing?
4. Look through the report critically. Often assumptions are based between behavior and attitude. For example, are there times where the report shows purchasing behavior and assumes that the survey participants preferred that product? What other reasons could they have for buying those products?
5. Let's say your group was the target market for your new product. How would the results change? Does the report describe you? Why or why not?
6. What is one thing you learned from this activity? What is one thing you are still unclear about?

Appendix 18B: Semiotics PowerPoint

SLIDE 1. Semiotics

Semiotics

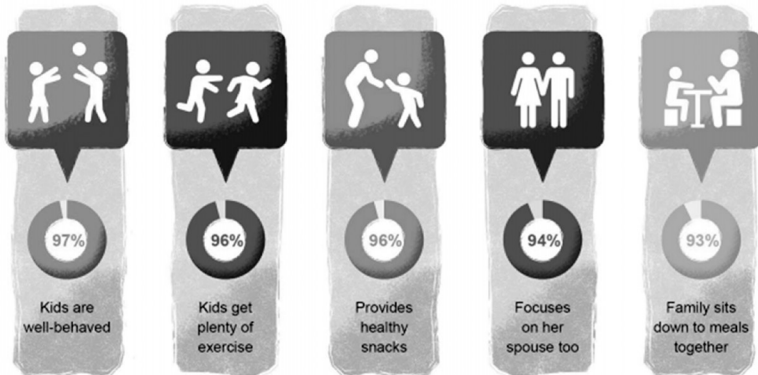
- Theory of signs
- We interpret signs based on previous experience (confirmation bias)
- Misinterpretation causes missed insights
- Being critical is important to understand how signs may not reflect all realities

SLIDE 2. Qualities of Being a “Good Mother”

BEHAVIOR, HEALTH, FAMILY VERY IMPORTANT TO BEING A “GOOD MOTHER”

Nearly all moms believe that a “good mother” ensures her kids exercise, provides healthy snacks, and has well-behaved children. Though there are qualities moms almost universally agree are important to being a “good mother,” high response rates across the board underline the pressure moms feel to do it all.

VERY/SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT QUALITIES OF A “GOOD MOTHER,” MAY 2014



Base: 1,400 female internet users aged 18+ who are moms of kids aged 0-17
SOURCE: GMI/MINTEL

SLIDE 3. Problems with Insights

Problems with insights

- Assumption one type of motherhood, choices
- Quantity over quality data
- Doesn't fully include cultural aspects of behavior and attitude
 - Economic realities of being a mother
 - Intersectionality

Notes

1. *Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation* (Tampa, FL: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, April 8, 2013, updated January 31, 2015), <http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/standards>.
2. Celia Ross, *Making Sense of Business Reference* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2013).
3. Lauren Bonetto, *Marketing to Moms: US, September 2015* (London: Mintel, September 2015), <http://store.mintel.com/marketing-to-moms-us-september-2015>.

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