The Power of a Narrative

Adaval, Rashmi

mkadaval@ust.hk
Department of Marketing,
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

This paper will describe how a course was turned around through the construction of an innovative curriculum. Using a novel blend of techniques, this renewed curriculum went from concept presentation, to deep understanding, to simulated application all embedded in a narrative course structure. This narrative course structure provided the scaffold that allowed students to master skills in a step-by-step manner and through stories that grew more interactive as time went on.

Within this overarching narrative structure, other learning techniques were introduced. These included mini-activities in each lecture, paired reading strategies for understanding business cases quickly, and a form of cognitive scaffolding that guided students' ability to think analytically. While the mini-activities within each session kept students engaged, motivated and learning, a variety of reading techniques that were introduced to help students read and understand a 25-page Harvard Business case within one hour, gave them the confidence to master difficult material. The thinking framework that was developed guided students to the central issue that they needed to locate in each case which broke down their habit of jumping to the end of the case to try and answer the assignment questions immediately without understanding. The combination of these innovations led to success as students felt that they had mastered materials that they had initially found intimidating. It developed their confidence as they volunteered for more case competitions and aspired to better jobs. This innovation has applicability to any course which uses case-based or problem-based learning.

Keywords

Narratives, learning, temporal structure, case analyses

THE POWER OF A NARRATIVE

For thousands, maybe millions of years, people have been telling stories to each other. They have told stories around the campfire; they have traveled from town to town, telling stories to relate the news of the day… Whatever the means, and whatever the venue, storytelling seems to play a major role in social interaction.

--Schank and Abelson

When I was asked to contribute a paper for this session, I had little but a story to contribute. A story of how I used a 'story' to turn a course around. Before telling you this story, however, I should begin with Mark Twain's cautionary note: *'Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. By Order of the Author.'* Therefore, to reiterate what I tell my students: 'Read if you must – but with a questioning mind.'

Stories have been a part of my life since I was a child. Their ubiquitous presence, their centrality to my existence and their power in shaping my thinking is something that I did not appreciate until I was confronted with a problem – the solution to which was suggested by my recollection of a narrative-like past experience. But let me begin at the beginning.

If someone had told me that my biggest challenge in Hong Kong would be teaching, I would have laughed aloud. Behind that laugh would have been the over-confidence and perhaps arrogance of someone who had been a successful teacher in the US. I knew I was good at teaching and I therefore took it for granted. Yet, my initial efforts in Hong Kong were nothing short of disastrous. Students complained about excessive workload, appeared unmotivated, and seemed to dislike me. Not only was this depressing but, what was worse, I had no idea how to turn the situation around. The course that I was teaching (Brand Management) was structured entirely around business cases and a simulation game. Each case reflected a problem that a company had encountered and demonstrated how a marketing decision made in one situation led to a chain of events that eventually created problems for the brand. These cases provided the foundation for a simulation game that students played later. The tools that I was using were ones that I and other faculty have used in the US. I had never before encountered a problem – either with motivation or with the workload. Students loved cases. The stories that the cases were built around were fun to read. The simulation game was tough but exciting. But, in Hong Kong, it didn't work. What was the problem here?

After the first year, it eventually dawned on me that much of the problem had to do with reading. I had grossly underestimated how much time my students took to read these 25-30-page cases. They often read five pages very carefully and then gave up discouraged. Their inability to cope with the reading left them with a feeling of inadequacy; case discussions were lost on them and their motivation plummeted. One option would have been to drop the cases and the simulation game. I was reluctant to adopt this approach because it meant toning down the material. This seemed somewhat patronizing because it implied that Hong Kong students were incapable of handling material that their counterparts in other countries could handle. It also meant giving up on material that was directly relevant. I believed in the material I was delivering and did not want to compromise.

I knew I had to overcome problems with reading, analytic thinking and motivation. Since I had no idea how to accomplish this, I found myself reflecting on my own school and college experiences. I thought about the classes that I enjoyed and the ones that I didn't. Who were the master teachers who had a profound impact on me? Two people came to mind. The first was my high school teacher in English literature. Many of us

grew to love Shakespeare watching him act out parts from Julius Caesar and Macbeth. But what made his classes particularly interesting (for me) was that, in addition to explaining Shakespeare, he gave us a historical perspective of the setting, the political and social situation of the time and other little tidbits that provided a rich context. These little digressions were 'mini' stories attached to the main narrative and only made me want to read more. The other person who had a profound impact on my learning is my father. A doctor by profession, he is a master storyteller. Everything that he has ever taught me has been in the form of stories. I remember peering through his microscope at the age of three and being told a story about how viruses attack healthy cells. All of this was obviously explained in the form of a story where a 'wicked' virus wanted to break down the walls of the cell. As I reflected on these experiences, I realized that what 'hooked' me was the 'story' or the 'narrative' element of the experience. Like a well-written book that is hard to put down, a narrative structure (with its temporal connections) can maintain interest and create an insatiable need to learn. Once I realized this, I knew I had to bring the 'story' into my classes.

The first steps involved dividing the class into three modules (the beginning, the middle and the end) and creating little stories within the overall narrative. I will illustrate this using a simple point that I wanted students to take home.

THE BEGINNING…

This module presented the basic ideas behind brand management and brand equity. For example, students were told that Brand Management requires maintenance of a brand's equity over time and that management has certain tools (e.g., pricing, advertising, promotions, etc.) to accomplish this. However, given that there were two parties involved (consumers and management), each time a management decision was made using one of the tools mentioned, consumers formed impressions of the brand – some desirable and others undesirable. Thus, if McDonald's offers a 'Snoopy' toy as part of its 'Happy Meal' to get consumers into the restaurant, it might be beneficial in the short run – evoking the type of response that management had hoped for. However, it was also likely to have a long-term impact on consumer perceptions and brand equity (e.g., McDonald's is for families with little kids, but not for me). This is a simple point. However, the assessment of these different perceptions required statistical techniques like factor analysis and multi-dimensional scaling. It also requires an analysis of communication messages and inferences about the 'unintended' consequences of marketing actions. Since this module is heavy on theory and lectures, I tried to 'lighten' it with 'mini stories' and group assignments (see Appendix A). These stories and exercises were completed in class and helped students integrate the material and also provided a 'retrieval cue'. If, at any point, I wished to remind them of a concept, all I had to do was remind them of the 'Snoopy story', the 'Ferrari story' or the 'Benetton story' and it would come flooding back. By the time students finished this module, they had grasped the idea that marketing decisions had both intended and unintended consequences on brand perception. They also knew that once these perceptions were formed, they were hard to change.

…THE MIDDLE…

In this module, I emphasized the same point but used a different technique. I introduced the notion of a business case – a different type of story. The second module was designed to make the story more interactive and was a continuation of the same basic point that I had made in the first module. However, it was done differently – through business cases in which they 'played detective' and tried to find the 'key issue' that was responsible for the current problems outlined in the case.

In most business schools these types of case or story are considered powerful learning tools. However, students at HKUST balked at the thought of tackling a Harvard business case largely because of the time it took to read one. I knew I had to confront the 'reading' problem. I worked out a method of paired or group reading that would allow students to read a case quickly and get to the main points. An in-class demonstration where students were told NOT to read the case prior to class but to read it together eventually got around this problem. The next problem that had to be confronted was related to 'analytical thinking'. I used 'board plans' to dance around the case until they got to the key issues (see Appendix B). Once they did, the solutions were easier to think of. This allowed students to separate the case into, a) key problem areas, b) the strategic decisions they had to make, and c) the implementation of the strategy. I supplemented these case discussions with notes. I made the links to other material that had already been covered – often repeating what was obvious to me but not obvious to them. Like a story where the protagonist's motivation is explained, I found myself explaining how and why a particular case fit into the overall course.

By the end of this module, students had completed four complex cases and were familiar with the idea that every management action sets in motion a chain of anticipated and unanticipated consequences. In many ways, it was a continuation of the same basic point that I wished to make in the first module. However, in this module, they discovered it for themselves by case analysis.

... AND THE END

My next step was to tell them that despite all this 'learning' – they would make similar mistakes when they were in positions of power. To demonstrate this, I introduced them to a simulation game. The simulation game is also built around a story. It pertains to a leading pharmaceutical company. Students have to play different management roles and manage several brands over a simulated ten-year period. As they work through the simulation, they make similar mistakes (ones that they were warned about) and this reinforces the same points that were made in previous modules.

When I had first used the simulation game, it was perceived as 'harsh'. Grades depended on performance, and because the likelihood of not doing well was high, it created anxiety. Consequently, students dreaded it and didn't see it as a learning tool. I changed this to make it more 'friendly', yet as close as they would get to a real experience. I played the game with them and talked about my own mistakes, making them realize that even the professor could get it wrong. I posted updates and tips to help

them along. I created assignments that were introduced at different points and showed them how they could analyze their data to do better. Once again, I took time to make the links to earlier modules and tried to show (as in a narrative) how something that was creating problems now was the result of an error in judgment earlier.

MOTIVATION – REACH FOR THE STARS

The big challenge has always been to motivate students to do more. To do that I felt that one must not only set the bar high but also provide students with a scaffold that helps them to climb over it. I found the scaffold that I was looking for in a narrative that helped them to realize the complexities of a market situation. This understanding, coupled with a degree of mastery, gave them the confidence to tackle more. I was never shy of pointing out deficiencies. But I took the time to show them how to overcome these deficiencies - sometimes with a story of how I overcame my own deficiencies and at other times with a special session devoted to solving a learning problem. In the end, I merely implemented things I believed in. That is, the class never ends. Smaller classes give one the privilege of getting to know the students as individuals, their strengths and weaknesses. They blossom when they are in a non-threatening environment where they can admit these weaknesses and get help in eliminating them. If they are afraid to speak in public, they need to be drawn out slowly. For example, I ask them to answer simple questions first, and follow it up with a lot of confidence building. If they are math-phobic, they need someone who doesn't intimidate them with numbers. In the end, it is not about how smart you are but how smart you can get them to be.

In working through these teaching issues, I perhaps learned a lot more than the students. Teaching in Hong Kong was a humbling experience. It forced me to go back to my 'stories' and think about the teachers who had had an impact on my life. I realized that what made me emerge from their classes with my heart and mind racing was not the topic but the story-like format they used, the enthusiasm they conveyed, their belief that I had interesting ideas to contribute, and their faith in my abilities. They made me want to reach for the stars and instilled in me a belief that I could, if I wanted, accomplish most things. This is what I have wanted to give to my students – the excitement, the nurturing and the knowledge to have the confidence to chase their dreams.

REFERENCES

Schank, R. C. and R. P. Abelson (1999), Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story. In R. S. Wyer (ed.), *Advances in Social Cognition* (Vol. 8. pp. 1-85), Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Appendix A

(Assignment 4 - Brand Equity and Positioning)

The ad for Benetton given below is from a campaign 'Family of the Future'. The byline reads 'United Colors of Benetton'.

a) The ad does not focus on showing clothes – rather it makes a statement through the picture shown followed by the byline 'United colors of Benetton'. Why, in your opinion, is Benetton doing this? Would you consider this a successful way to position the brand?

b) Using Aaker's model of brand equity OR Y&R's Brand asset valuator – identify problems (if any) with Benetton's brand equity.

Appendix B

(Board Plan)

1. WHAT BRANDS ARE YOU DEALING WITH

Defender – basic model – Limited edition

Range Rover – approx. $50K ($400 K in HK or after tax $800K) – luxury vehicle

Discovery – $30K (240K in HK or after tax 480K)

Issues: Launch of Discovery in North American market – *what positioning to use; retail strategy; allocation of resources are issues*

5. US CONSUMERS

Order of entry → different perceptions

→ focus on price/attributes

Different groups – families vs. young singles

→ how are needs different.

Families – safety and price

Younger people – *off-road/adventure*

Key competency and segment need match?

6. COMPETITION

Ford Explorer → 302,201 units

Jeep Cherokee or Jeep → 338,007 units

Much, much larger than LR

Stiff competition Price of competitor models lower (Exhibit 9)

Discovery strength – off road use

4. CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

Vehicle	UK	US
Land Rover	reliable, practical 4 WD tough, comfortable transport	like a Jeep don't know manufacturer *Core unknown*
Range Rover	same toughness But luxury and Elegance, Queen uses it	*Overpriced Jeep*
Discovery	upgrade of LR	*Downgrade of RR*

STUDENTS GUESS KEY ISSUES

1. Order of entry affects consumer perceptions. What impact will it have?

2. How to fix consumer perceptions cannot have new line extensions without knowledge of core brand

3. Mass market vs. niche market Sacrifice share for loyalty?

2. ROLE OF EACH BRAND IN THE PRODUCT PORTFOLIO

	Defender	Discovery	RR
Core Attrib. Assoc.	rugged adventure fun	safety, seating, capacity	prestige status quality
Main Use	off-road adventure	family use transport (kids school)	luxury vehicle (travel)
Portfolio use	Keeper of trademark THE CORE	volume builder	aspirational flagship

7. CONSUMER SEGMENTS

Wants to be a big player. Realistic?

Possible markets

Family – big but competition stiff,

→ perceptions hard to change, price sensitive.

Young singles (rich yuppies)

→ small market, not too price sensitive

→ *Which one is realistic?*

3. SEQUENCE OF ENTRY

UK: Landrover → Range Rover → Discovery

US: Range Rover → Land Rover → Discovery

Any resulting differences in perception between various car models in US? (Exhibit 15). If no – then why not? What causes this problem?