



Integrated learning of integrated marketing communication in Ubon Ratchathani University Thailand

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to assess students' views on Integrated Learning as it pertains to the instruction and assessment of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). In particular, it assesses how students feel about non-traditional instructional methods, such as case studies, presentations, and a final term project.

Method: In the first semester of 2007, twenty questionnaires were given out to third-year International Business students at Ubon Ratchathani University's Faculty of Management Science. Content analysis was used to categorise participant responses, and statistical software was used to analyse the data.

Findings: The results showed that students thought integrated learning was a great approach to education in the IMC programme. In addition, the term project gave students a rare chance to combine theory and practice, which improved their grasp and application of IMC.

Implications/Novel contribution: This research is crucial. Students are more actively involved, learn more about the material, and have a firmer grasp on how to apply what they've learned in theory to real-world problems; these benefits form the basis for the value of integrated learning in IMC instruction.

Keywords: Integrated Learning, Integrated Marketing Communication, Project-Based Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Both academics and professionals in the field of marketing have taken an increased interest in IMC. Market fragmentation and the proliferation of promotional tools are two reasons businesses need to adopt IMC, argues [Gronstedt and Siracuse \(1998\)](#). The focus of marketers has shifted from mass to individual customers as a result of IMC. Relationship, customer retention, and database marketing are three primary areas that should be prioritised in an ideal IMC strategy ([Iacobucci & Calder, 2003](#)). Despite its persuasiveness, IMC has its difficulties. According to [Shimp \(2003\)](#), a company's integrated marketing communications (IMC) efforts are more likely to succeed if the various components of those efforts are so well-coordinated that customers can see that the company is saying the same thing across all of its various advertising, events, and programming. Teaching and learning IMC should be conducted in a way that equips students and practitioners with not only the theory but also the practice in the field to help them appreciate the application of in-class theories in real marketing situations, as IMC is becoming not only a means for companies to enhance the relationship with their customers but also a critical component of firms' brand equity strategy ([Gurău, 2008](#); [Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005](#)).

To better prepare students for the demanding job market of the twenty-first century, the International Business Program in the Faculty of Management Science at Ubon Ratchathani University offers an IMC course. Students should leave this course with an understanding of IMC concepts that can be applied to enhance the marketing efforts of their respective businesses. There were supposed to be lecture-style lessons and homework for this course. However, at the end of the course in the first semester of the 2016 academic year, student feedback indicated that they only had the theory and no real-world practice, which greatly limited their understanding of the course. As a result, the course was revamped to incorporate a more integrated teaching and learning approach by combining traditional lectures, case study analysis and presentations, and a term project working with a real business. This

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course now requires students to analyse an existing small business's integrated marketing communication strategy, develop an IMC programme that would be of value to that business, and present their findings to the company's management.

Since the above modifications were made to the course's structure, an assessment of how well the students learned the material and applied it in practice was necessary (Integrated learning). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to assess students' familiarity with IMC theory and practice, as well as their ability to apply this theory and practice in the creation of an integrated marketing strategy for a small business, with the ultimate goal of providing constructive recommendations for enhancing the teaching and practise of IMC.

Objectives

- To access students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an integrated approach to the teaching and learning of IMC
- To identify shortcomings in this teaching approach and propose mitigating solutions to help enhance the teaching and learning of this course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing acceptance of IMC can be seen as a result of a combination of many factors. Not only has mass market and media witness disintegration that has empowered customers (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006; Kerr, Mortimer, Dickinson, & Waller, 2012), the emergence of new media (Lin, Venkataraman, & Jap, 2013; Wang & Tchernev, 2012) and the fragmentation of traditional advertising media (Gurău, 2008; Kerr & Schultz, 2010) are amongst some of the ultimate reasons for the rise of IMC. As Madhavaram et al. (2005) puts it, IMC has now become a crucial part of every business marketing and brand equity strategy. The concept of IMC is complex and wide. In a studied carried out by (Chaihanchai & Anantachart, 2017), to review the understanding of the concept of IMC amongst Thai Academics, findings reveal that, though all respondents agreed that IMC allows its practice in all types of business, whether non-profit, or profit-oriented businesses because it is the only approach that combines business units and focuses on using the right communication of tool to talk to the right customer, there was however great differences in the way respondents define IMC. In fact, only one of the respondents defines IMC as a customer-oriented business process. All other respondents saw IMC as a form of communication, not a concept or process. These difference in views are consequently translated in the teaching and learning of IMC therefore by using integrated learning which is a connection between school life, knowing and doing and content and context (Roberts & Kellough, 2004) students will be able to balance different conceptual and teaching approaches to real life practice and applicability.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate students' evaluation of the course with regards to the concept of integrated teaching and learning, Questionnaires were used. To establish the reliability of the Item, five Questionnaires were first administered to the students representing one-quarter of the sample. Analysis of this pilot study revealed an Alpha-coefficient of 0.72.

The final phase of the study saw the distribution of twenty Questionnaires to all the 3rd year International Business Management student who took the course in the first semester. The Questionnaires were divided into two parts. Part one contained demographic information (such as, age, gender), while the second part of the Questionnaire contained Items assessing students' perceptions of the effectiveness of an integrated approach in the teaching and learning of IMC (such as satisfaction of classroom lectures, experience and understanding gain from case studies, term project, the level of knowledge and understanding gain in designing an IMC program as a term project). Participants in the study were equally asked to provide further recommendations and/or suggestions for the improvement of the teaching and learning of IMC. The Questionnaire employs the use of a five-point Likert scale for respondents to give their opinions towards different teaching and learning aspects of the course with higher numbers indicating high satisfaction or agreement with the concept of integrated learning in IMC. Content analysis is then used to group the data into the following categories: Lecture, cases studies and presentations, and a term project.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty questionnaires were completed representing all the students who took part in the course. The result revealed a gender ratio of 10% and 90% for male and female respectively. The participants' mean age was 20.7 years old and the mean number of absences was 0.65 indicating a high rate of class attendance.

The overall findings clearly satisfied the research objectives as they revealed that the teaching and learning of IMC using an integrated learning approach which contained a combination of lectures, case analysis, presentation and a term project broadened students' understanding of the concepts and practice of IMC (Item 11). Aspects of cases analysis and presentation were seen by students to have contributed highly towards their understanding of the course (Item 6 and 8). There was equally a high agreement consensus amongst the participants that they had a better understanding of IMC after the course completion (Item 12). All items relating to more students involvement and participation in none traditional lecture also received fairly equal levels of agreement indicating a high acceptance that this method helped enhanced students understanding (Item 3, 5,7 and 10), while items relating to preference of learning by traditional lecture methods only and prior IMC knowledge before the course received lower level of agreement, indicating students' dissatisfaction with the traditional learning method Item (1,2, and 4). Students' opinions of the use of Integrated Learning in the IMC course are shown in Table 1.

In addition, some respondents provided further opinions and suggestions of learning for this course which can and has been categorized into three groups representing the different learning approaches, presented herein.

Lectures

This course contained twelve lectures which provided the students with the concept of IMC under the topics, the concept of IMC, Marketing strategy and analysis, The Media and IMC, Customer behavior, the nature of communication, creativity and IMC, Media types, developing an IMC plan, IMC and the Internet, role of direct marketing in IMC and finally designing an IMC program. The course provided a participative learning environment encouraging and using in-class discussions to enable students brainstormed and exchange ideas and opinion on the different topics covered throughout the course. A midterm and final exam was used to evaluate students' understanding of the concepts of IMC. Students' opinion on lectures indicated that, while most students appreciated the necessity of lecture as a means to introduce and build understanding of the major course concepts, there seems to be a general consensus amongst participants that lectures and in-class discussions remain only theory and therefore required a more real-life participatory approach to further provide learners with the opportunity to appreciate the applicability of theory in real life business situations.

Case Studies and Presentation

In order to bridge the learning gap created by the theoretical nature of the course, case studies were used to strengthen students' critical thinking and analytical abilities. This provided the opportunity for students to evaluate the implementation different aspects of IMC and IMC tools. Understand and act as critics of how different companies apply IMC in different scenarios. For each case study, four groups of five were created and assigned a case which was different from that of other groups. These cases had to be analyzed and a critical examination presented to the class at the start of every class. The groups were rotated on a week by week basis to give students the opportunity to work with different group members in a bit to promote the variety of ideas and opinions. For each case, the students were expected to understand the problem faced by the company, the strategy it adopted, the process and procedure of implementation and the outcomes and results. Additionally, students were asked to propose an alternative IMC solution which would have worked better for the business given the situation faced as in the case. Though this provided the opportunity for students to learn outside of class, most participants indicated that the fact that case studies were based on business situations that had already occurred, the availability of hindsight eliminated every aspect of uncertainty provided by real-life situation "case studies are not the real thing" as one respondent puts it. Despite the shortcomings of the case studies, students highly agreed that case studies not only provided them with a better understanding of the IMC course but equally helped build their critical thinking and analytical skills as well as help improve their ability to present their ideas as they had to do many presentations. Moreover, this encouraged them to participate in class and made the course much more enjoyable.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation

1.	I already had enough IMC knowledge before attending this course	1.70	0.571
2.	I am satisfied with learning by Lecture only	1.90	0.852
3.	I can exchange my opinions and receive more understanding of IMC from In Class-discussion and activities	3.60	0.995
4.	I will prefer to have only lectures in the IMC course	1.60	0.598
5.	Working with the business I chose for my term project has broadened my experiences and understanding of IMC	3.85	0.933
6.	Working on and presenting weekly case studies assigned by the lecturer has broadened my experiences and understanding of IMC	3.75	0.851
7.	working with and learning from the professional marketer in my chosen business for the team project has broadened my experiences and understanding of IMC	3.55	0.826
8.	Presenting case studies weekly did not help me improve my understanding of IMC	1.75	0.786
9.	The IMC program I designed will benefit the business I Worked with By designing an IMC program for my chosen business, I have improved my understanding of IMC	3.95	0.686
10.	Integrated learning of IMC with a combination of Lectures, case studies, presentations, and a term project working with a real business would increase the success in IMC learning	3.85	0.812
11.	I have a better understanding of IMC after the course completion	4.40	0.680
		4.20	0.695

Term Project

Project-based learning is a comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning that is design to engage students in the investigation of authentic problems (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Due to the fact that this method of learning tries to capitalized on the successes of cooperative or collaborative learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Land & Greene, 2000), students with little or no experience working in groups, may face difficulties negotiating compromise (Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Socha & Socha, 1994). However, Project-based learning offers an engaging instructional method to make learners active constructors of knowledge (Grant, 2002). Therefore in an attempt to provide students with the opportunity to test in-class theories in real business scenarios, a term project was assigned. Students were divided into four groups of five and each to work on any one of two given project of their choice. The two businesses were the Ubon Ratchathani University Hotel "U-place" and Indochina Gateway Travel and Tour services "Torey Tour". At the start of the projects, students were required to do a critical analysis of the business's current marketing strategies and efforts while trying to identify weaknesses in their current use of IMC. At the completion of this stage, each group made a presentation to the representative of their chosen company about their current marketing loopholes and provided an effective roadmap on how they intended to work with the business within the course of three months to improve their IMC with the aim of increasing market share, creating awareness, minimizing cost, and or reducing ambiguity in the company's marketing and communication process. In reaction to the term project, a majority of the students stated that in order to complete their term project, they needed to use all theories learned throughout the course which gave them a better understanding of the course in general. Moreover, most respondents emphasized the importance of the additional knowledge gain while working with marketers from their chosen businesses and the ideas the learned which would have been otherwise absent if the course was purely theoretical based. With respect to the learning outcome, many respondents indicated that they had a better understanding of IMC after the course completion (Item 11), which was considerably higher than before they attended the course (item 1). It can, therefore, be summarized that students attained the course intended outcome, driven by the integrated teaching and learning method of the course.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research provides the bases for the importance of adopting Integrated Learning in the teaching of IMC as it not only improve students participation but also provides for an in-depth understanding of the of the course and enhances students experience in applying theory to real-life business problems. Although the time frame did not provide students with the possibility of gathering and analyzing more market data, thereby leading some students to question the effectiveness of their IMC programs, company feedback however, suggested that students' input had greatly improved not only their marketing strategy but also on their understanding of IMC as a tool to effectively communicated with their customers. "Torey Tour" even offer to give a group of students the finance needed to finalize their IMC program for the company and make it operational. It can, therefore, be summarized that integrated learning provides students the necessary opportunity of learning by doing which considerably improves learning outcomes.

It is equally important to mention that as this research focuses on learning IMC with a small group of students, a large group will provide more challenges for both teachers and learners alike which may affect if not completely alter some of the findings of this study. It is therefore imperative that the research is carried out using a much larger sample size and in a different setting.

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