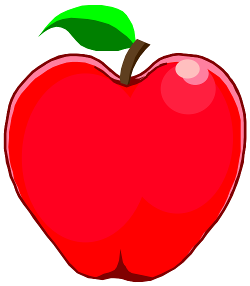
Lars Perner, Ph.D.



A BRIEF STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Several objectives underlie my teaching orientation. First, *critical thinking* and *creativity* are strongly emphasized. When I first started teaching upper division marketing electives, I made it a point to tell students that rather than merely regurgitating what a firm is currently doing, their papers and presentations should **add value**—by exploring and discussing the *options, challenges, and choices* management was facing. It frustrated me to no end that, no matter how much I emphasized that theme, somewhere in the neighborhood of a quarter of the class would present strictly on current firm behavior—even as the end of the term neared. When questioned about options and decisions, these students would mostly greet me with a blank stare. However, as I got to know today's business students better, I found a way to motivate them to go beyond parroting articles describing current strategy—a warning about the weakness of the job market for historians. As a way to stimulate critical and creative thinking, I have also developed a set of "Intriguing Marketing Questions" where students are challenged to come up with explanations for various marketing phenomena. Many of these questions are intended to show how dangerous incorrect assumptions can be.

A second emphasis of mine is the *critical evaluation of secondary information*. Perhaps my proudest innovation is the "research based case" where students are provided an article from the popular business or trade press and asked to apply course concepts to the need of the firm. Rather than taking the traditional perspective that cases should be considered from the point of view of the firm back when the case was written, often several years ago, students are required to do library research to find relevant information from periodicals databases such as Lexis-Nexis® and Dow Jones. I have found that students need to learn from experience, and do not frequently catch on from early instructions, that it is usually more fruitful to research competitors and the consumer rather than the firm itself. Since many students are lured by the ease of putting together a paper through "Net surfing," I make it a point to strongly challenge the credibility and objectivity of Web pages and company reports. I must admit that weaning students of the company web sites is a rather trying task.

A third emphasis is *written communication*. One of my greatest strengths as a teacher is my ability to read and make constructive comments on large numbers of papers. When I put together a summary of a university-industry conference on the management of technology at the California Polytechnic State University, a recurring comment from industry was the need to improve our graduates' written communication abilities. Thus, my comments address not only substance, but also writing quality. When I assigned my consumer behavior students four short papers and one longer, integrative paper, I was pleased to see the significant progress that students made throughout the semester not only on substantial issues, but in their writing as well. My syllabi contain a "coding sheet" that allows me to concisely report themes of problems that occur in papers, allowing me to spend more time writing out comments more specific to the individual report. A secondary benefit is that students can use this "advance warning" as a checklist by which papers can be examined prior to submission.

My fourth area of emphasis is *individual work*. Today, team work within course assignments appears to be emphasized significantly more than it was back when I was in college. I certainly recognize that there is a value in learning to work with others, a skill that is obviously important on the job. Nevertheless, it seems that the pendulum has by now swung so far that, on the margin, students will probably benefit more from completing individual, as opposed to group, projects in my courses. A major long-term benefit that I hope will result from the assignment of individual projects is that students are forced to face their relative weaknesses rather than "bartering" themselves out of that challenge. For example, everyone in my classes is required to write up his or her findings.

Balancing my emphasis on individual work, however, I have found that students frequently like to work in teams, with this experience giving them an opportunity to "bounce" their ideas off each other. Thus, in more recent years, I have introduced several non-graded, in-class team exercises where teams will face an assignment that they will subsequently present to the class. For example, in my consumer behavior class, one of my favorite assignments is to ask students to segment the U.S. market for bathroom towels (the most mundane product that I could think of) based on one of several schemes covered in class. I have been quite impressed with the thoughtfulness and creativity of the presentations.

My course grading emphasizes projects more than exams. Tests are, however, an integral part of the course and provide valuable feedback both to me and to the students, and I take pride integrative nature of my exams. I alert my students very early on to the fact that one of my favorite words is "implications" and that even regurgitating my own words of wisdom without context is unlikely to bear satisfying fruit. Rather than asking students to reproduce somewhat arbitrary definitions for exams, I have been known to provide an "official" definition covered in class with instructions to discuss the important issues and elements that it raises.

In terms of the mechanics of running actual class sessions, I have been strongly influenced by law school pedagogy. Rather than adopting the brutal implementation of the Socratic method as it is practiced within legal education, I have, however, chosen a somewhat “kinder, gentler” approach where individual participants are given follow-up questions to probe the implications of their answers, a process that often takes several iterations. I was also inspired to include in my exams, albeit as a sometimes less popular section, “issue spotters” where students are required to read a brief description of the situation facing a firm and then identify and apply relevant course concepts to the specific firm.

As a final point, my strong belief in integrating teaching and research should be mentioned. Too often, we see that relatively few efforts are made to present to students the implications of the most current academic research. I make it a point to try to translate current research developments as much as possible into managerial implications. I also emphasize what is available to the desirous manager through internal or external consultants--e.g., how conjoint analysis and scanner data can help answer questions that managers face rather than going into details on the mechanics of these tools.

“Work-ethic disadvantaged” students should be warned that my classes could be a rather trying experience.