

Fostering Citizen Scholars through Marketing Education

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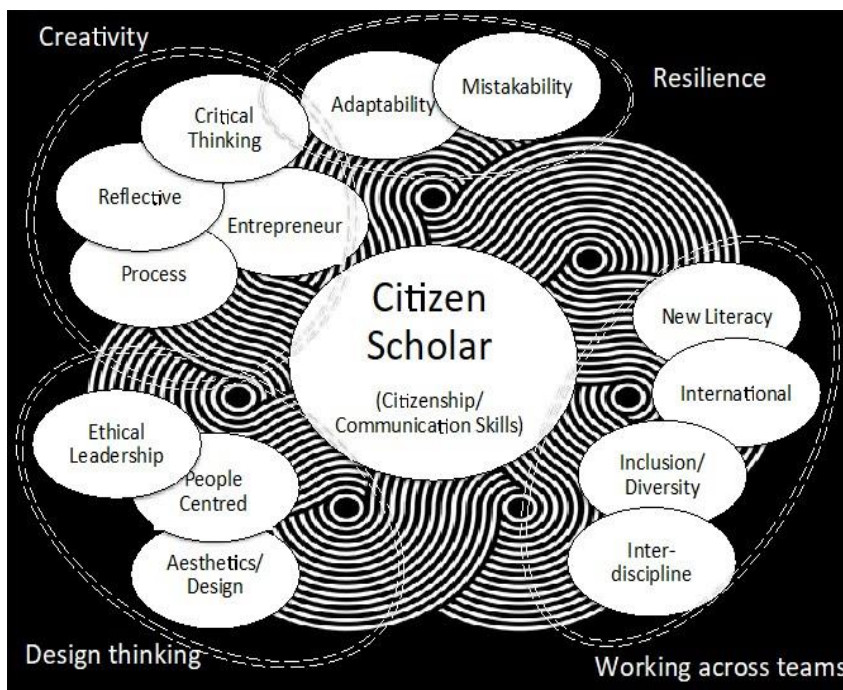
Introduction

The objective of this paper is to illustrate and reflect on some teaching practices of how Citizen Scholars can be fostered through marketing education, an area which has not been explored in the marketing literature. The Citizen Scholar is defined as ‘a student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of the context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society’ (Arvanitakis and Hornsby, 2016, p. 1). Using a case study of an undergraduate client-based marketing research module, the paper demonstrates how curriculum designs and pedagogical strategies can be developed to create opportunities for marketing students to exercise as Citizen Scholars, thus motivating students’ meaningful learning and engendering a positive sustained impact on business and communities.

Background

The higher education sector is facing a fast-changing learning environment driven by technological advancements, constantly emerging social issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, war, and climate change. How do educators prepare students in time of disruption? For universities to remain relevant and meet the changing needs of the societies and economies, Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016) advocate the approach of cultivating our students as Citizen Scholars, that is, to promote both scholarship and active and engaged citizens in higher education. Active engagement in communal (societal) problems gives students a motivation to learn, a purpose to carry out the coursework, a desire to be a Citizen Scholar and an opportunity to develop the Citizen Scholar attributes (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Citizen Scholar Attributes



Source: Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016)

The case study examined in the paper is part of a Client-based Marketing Research module delivered to final year Business Studies students at the university. The project is designed for students to partner with an enterprise client of their choice to identify pressing marketing issues and carry out marketing research to shed further light on these issues. The development of this curriculum design is driven by the university's mission to transform lives and societies and inspired by the Citizen Scholar framework in which both scholarship and actively engaged citizens can be embedded in pedagogical strategies (Arvanitakis and Hornsby, 2016; Gao, 2021).

Methodology

The Citizen Scholar framework encourages students to embrace their responsibilities as citizens in their various communities. Most of the students have chosen to collaborate with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in their local communities. How Irish SMEs respond to fast-moving business environments has become an urgent issue that has been especially compounded by the pandemic. The key objective of this project is for students, through their meaningful and active engagement with businesses, to have an opportunity to develop and apply their marketing knowledge and skills and build up their Citizen Scholar attributes, such as resilience, adaptability, equality and ethical leadership. In the meantime, through their close collaboration with students, such enterprises, especially Irish SMEs, can reap the benefits of the students' marketing insights and enlightening ideas.

Students can self-select in groups during the first week of the semester. Each group develops a marketing research proposal based on the organisation's marketing issues. Once the research objectives have been established, then the group will decide how the primary research tasks can be divided among group members – with each student using at least one primary data collection method to gain relevant experience in fieldwork, data analysis, and reporting. Students are presented with a wide range of issues from their chosen organisations. For instance, how to increase sustainability and corporate social responsibility within the company? How to improve company's brand awareness through social media? Do Eco-Friendly products have an impact on customers' consumption habits?

The project consists of three assessments: the group proposal (20%) and the individual research report (70%) and the group presentation to their client (10%). The detailed marking scheme, guidelines and templates for the research proposal and report are provided to students in the first lecture. Even though this module is delivered to a large class with an average of over 250 students, each student receives individually customised feedback due to the implementation of the grading rubric set up on the university's learning platform. The assessment on the individual report is broken down into seven specific criteria (e.g., Subject Knowledge and Coherence 20%). Students' reflection (10%) on the research process offers an opportunity to gain valuable insights into their learning journey and the Citizen Scholar attributes that they have developed.

Results and Discussion

Students' meaningful work has created a sustained and significant impact both within and outside the wider university community. To date, over 790 businesses across Ireland in the last seven years have gained direct benefits from the projects, involving over 1,000 students. Research projects have covered almost every sector of business, ranging from charities (e.g., Barrestown; Peita House; St Vincent de Paul; LauraLynn; Thrombosis Ireland and Thrombosis); sustainable consumption (e.g., second-hand clothing/retailers; sustainable coffee cups); local restaurants/food trucks/coffee shops; retailers/supermarkets; community rugby/soccer clubs; gyms/fitness/sports centers; crafts/gifts shops; hotels/resorts; and hairdressers/barbers to

education and financial services. Employing their research skills, students have investigated a broad range of timely issues, such as raising brand awareness of new start-ups, how to adapt customer service strategy to reflect changing consumer behaviors amid Covid-19, maintaining customer retention during the pandemic lockdowns, formulating sale strategies in response to fast-changing environments, how to gain a competitive advantage in a saturated market and how to manage social media platforms with limited resources. This enterprise-engaged pedagogy design has recently been adopted by colleagues teaching other marketing modules, leading to further direct impact on both students and businesses each year.

Students' continuous scholarly curiosity, enthusiasm and professionalism have been consistently praised by businesses and communities, and the insights they have brought to many enterprises have been refreshing and intriguing. As one of the Irish SME owners put it:

'We were delighted to be involved with the [name of the university] marketing research project with [names of the students]. We were so impressed with the students' professional presentation and enthusiasm. It has been a fantastic opportunity to learn more about the importance of online marketing and the sustained demand for Irish craft in the current climate. The routes recommended by the students to capitalise on this has really given us food for thought. Although we are very aware of the monumental importance of marketing, it is something we – like many other SMEs – have really neglected. I tend to put this down to lack of time, but I think it is primarily because of a lack of knowledge in this field. Having the chance to collaborate with a group of students studying marketing and willing to work with us to improve our business has really inspired and informed us. I would really recommend this partnership to any other SME who might be struggling with marketing or just needs a fresh perspective.'

Another charity comments that:

'I was given time to share the story of [name of the charity] and give a complete picture of the Charity and why we needed their help... The [marketing research] report is comprehensive, very informative and invaluable. It will really help improve our public communication strategy going forward. It has been easy and an absolute pleasure to work with this team of students.'

Students' feedback on this module has also been very positive, as demonstrated in the selection of recent testimonies below:

'This issue and this charity is something I hold dear and it almost didn't feel like an assignment at times because I was researching a cause I cared about.'

'The most enjoyable part of the project for me was having the opportunity to collaborate with the owners of [name of the firm]. I really enjoyed working with them and listening to the challenges that their company is currently faced with. I hope my research will help them moving forward and I wish them the greatest success in the future. It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to work with them both.'

'I feel that the most enjoyable part was carrying out the primary research with the interviewees because all participants gave some really enlightening answers which I knew I could develop, and it made me feel like what I was doing would truly add value to [name of the firm], which was rather rewarding.'

Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice

The Citizen Scholar framework has been largely overlooked in marketing education. Using a marketing research module as a case study, the paper aims to extend the marketing education practice and literature by embedding the Citizen Scholar framework in curriculum designs and pedagogical strategies.

This enterprise-engaged marketing research module offers students an opportunity to participate in the society and to develop Citizen Scholar attributes such as critical thinking and problem solving, written and oral communication, ethical decision-making, collaboration (work across teams), adaptability, and learning from mistakes. By working together, students and businesses have created and enhanced a sense of community and solidarity – values which will no doubt have a long-lasting impact on the soul of our society. Embracing the challenges of rapidly changing learning environment, marketing educators are encouraged to create and utilise opportunities to foster students as Citizen Scholars, thus serving and contributing to the society in a meaningful way.

Key References:

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