Teaching with Hands-on Experience: A Logo Selection Exercise

Abstract

This paper demonstrates how educators can teach an abstract concept to students and simultaneously provide hands-on experience in the classroom. Although the concept presented in this paper may be more applicable to management and marketing courses than physical science courses, the steps can be adapted to enhance the learning experience. First, the paper outlines the steps for teaching an abstract concept. Second, it instructs teachers on how to walk students through an in-class learning experience.

Introduction

The example presented is designed for a consumer behavior course in marketing. One of the concepts that is often taught in a consumer behavior course is semiotics. Semiotics is the study of symbols and their meanings (Solomon 2004). One of the practical applications of semiotics is the selection of logos to build brand recognition by consumers. This paper will first outline the steps for teaching an abstract concept such as semiotics. Second, it will instruct teachers on how to walk students through an in-class learning experience. Finally, the paper will provide guidance for hands-on teaching practices applicable to most business courses (Figure 1).

The Method for Effective Teaching of an Abstract Concept

A typical method of teaching a new concept is to define the concept followed by illustrative examples. Introducing a concept with the formal definition helps students learn the concept with the proper terminology. Illustrative examples help students to materialize the
abstract concept. However, in order to understand how the concept is related to the real world, students need an explanation of why the concept is important to know, to what areas it applies, and what subsequent implications the application of the concept may have. A question and answer session between the educator and students would be an effective way to clarify and reinforce the importance, application, and implications of the concept. Appendix A provides an example of the steps with explanations of the concept of semiotics.

**Steps for In-class Learning Experience**

The next step is to teach students how the concept is applied to the business world in an in-class learning experience. A useful approach is to present a scenario in the class. The educator may describe a scenario: “Suppose that you are starting a company, you are looking for a logo or symbol that is most representative of your company and product(s) and also most appropriate for the industry your company is in. How would you come up with the logo?”

In the process of answering this question, the educator has the opportunity to introduce a managerial technique that is used to identify consumer perceptions or opinions on various issues—conducting focus groups or surveys. If the students are not familiar with the process of conducting a focus group, then the process should be explained. It should be pointed out that in a focus group or survey study, the participants should be drawn from a representative sample of the company’s target segment.

In the in-class exercise, instead of conducting a focus group, a survey is used to identify the students’ perceptions toward various symbols based on a list of bi-polar adjectives. The symbols of various companies can be gathered from the Internet, newspapers or magazine ads
such as Wall Street Journal or Business Week. The bi-polar adjectives used in the survey are adapted from Bhat and Reddy (1998) (Appendix B).

The study consists of two parts. In part I, the students are presented each symbol and instructed to select the adjectives that best describe the symbol, and then rank the symbol based on how closely the symbol represents the selected adjective. In part II, the students are asked to select the most representative industry type for each symbol (Appendix B). The educator reads the instructions for Part I and demonstrates how the students would select an adjective and rank the symbol. The educator shows one symbol at a time by covering the others and allows adequate time for completion of selection of adjectives and ranking the symbols. The educator repeats the same steps for Part II of the survey and demonstrates an example.

The learning experience is not complete unless the results are interpreted and conclusions are discussed after the exercise. At this point, the educator demonstrates how the data is entered into a spreadsheet (e.g., Excel), and the frequencies and bar graphs are created in order to interpret data. Because the data entry takes time, the results from the students’ selections can be shown to the students during the next class meeting. Alternatively, the educator can demonstrate results from a prior in-class exercise if available. Repetitions of this exercise over the course of several semesters provide an opportunity to compare the results of several separate cross-sectional studies (opinions of the students on each symbol). The students in turn have the opportunity to see whether the answers by other students (their cohorts) are consistent. Consistency in responses is something that needs to be taken into consideration when making a managerial decision such as a logo selection.
In conclusion, this paper presents an example to business educators of how to teach an abstract concept with the application of a managerial technique used in decision making. The following summarizes the steps for teaching with hands-on experience.

**Figure 1**
Guidance for Teaching with Hands-on Experience

- Definition of the Concept
- Example(s)
- Importance of the Concept
- Application of the Concept
- (Managerial) Implications
- Scenario(s)
- In-class Hands-on Experience
- Discussion of Results/Conclusions
What is Semiotics?

Semiotics is a field of study that examines the association between signs and symbols and their role in the assignment of meaning (Mick 1986). Semiotics studies how consumers react emotionally to signs they come across in the environment and how they consciously and unconsciously derive meaning from them. Compelling evidence suggests that the unconscious mind may comprehend and respond to nonverbal symbols, form emotional responses, and guide human actions largely independent of conscious awareness.

From a semiotic perspective, marketing messages have three components: (1) object, (2) sign, and (3) interpretant. An object can be a product, service, brand, store, person, concept--the meaning of which is to be communicated (i.e., Energizer batteries). A sign is sensory imagery, such as a symbol or set of symbols that represents and communicates the intended meaning of the object (i.e., Energizer Bunny). The interpretant is the meaning derived from a sign (i.e., long-lasting life).

Importance of Semiotics:

“Semiotics is important to the understanding of consumer behavior because consumers use products to express their social identities” (Solomon 2004, p. 73). In order to understand how people emotionally react to symbols in the environment, one must gain an understanding of the shared meanings of various signs. Researchers doing work on semiotics emphasize that meaning is in part determined by the cultural context within which the sign is embedded. Thus, a sign in one culture may have an entirely different meaning from a sign in another culture. For example, associating animals with products is done frequently and effectively in the United
States. However, in some Asian cultures, the practice is viewed negatively. Thus, an advertisement by an optical company showing cute little animals wearing eyeglasses failed miserably in Thailand because animals symbolize a lower form of life among many people in Thai culture. Therefore, the field of semiotics has particular importance in marketing communications. Marketing and advertising managers must be alert to the use of symbols and how their target market will interpret them.

**Application of Semiotics:**

Semiotics has particular application to the positioning of brands and advertising. For example, universities regularly refine their logos and mascots because a catchy symbol can communicate the image about the college. In addition to helping to position a university, the use of the logos on merchandise can bring in millions of dollars to a university through licensing to vendors the right to use the logo typically for about a dollar per use.

**Managerial Implications**

The use of semiotics has implications for product positioning and differentiation. The symbols and signs that are linked to a brand or organization provide meanings that are interpreted and associated by consumers. For example, brand names are frequently linked to symbols such as the automobile brands--Mustang, Jaguar, Riviera, and New Yorker.
APPENDIX B: Steps for In-class Learning Experience

SEMIOTICS STUDY - Part I

PURPOSE: This study is designed to measure appropriateness of symbols and their meanings.

INSTRUCTIONS: This study will require you to select adjectives for symbols and rank them.

The administrator will project one symbol at a time with an overhead projector. After everyone has completed selecting and ranking a symbol, a new symbol will be projected.

First, examine each symbol and select the best adjective(s) that describe(s) the symbol by placing an ☑️ or ☑️ in the box(s) next to the adjective(s). You may choose one adjective or as many adjectives that seem appropriate for the symbol.

Next, rank the adjectives that you selected by how closely the symbol represents the adjective. The most closely associated adjective will be ranked 1, the next most closely associated adjective will be ranked 2, and so on until all of the selected adjectives have a ranking number next to them.

The example below shows Symbol 99 and the completed symbol response list.

Symbol 99

☑️ Sophisticated ☑️ Simple
☑️ Romantic ☑️ Unaffectionate
☑️ Successful ☑️ Unsuccessful
☑️ Unique ☐️ Ordinary
☑️ Expressive ☐️ Low-key
☑️ Glamorous ☑️ Ugly
☑️ Elegant ☐️ Inelegant
☑️ Stylish ☐️ Plain

If you have any questions concerning how to select and rank the adjective(s), please ask before the administrator starts the study. There will be no talking during the course of the study.

Please follow the administrator's instructions carefully as you are guided through the study.

Thank you for your assistance with this study!
SEMIOTICS STUDY – Part II

PURPOSE: This study is designed to measure appropriateness of symbols and their meanings.

INSTRUCTIONS: This study will require you to select an industry type for symbols.

The administrator will project one symbol at a time with an overhead projector. After everyone has completed selecting and ranking a symbol, a new symbol will be projected.

Examine each symbol and select the best symbol that represents an industry type by placing an ✗ or ☑ in the box next to the industry type. Choose only one industry type that seems appropriate for the symbol.

The example below shows Symbol 99 and the completed symbol response list.

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Symbol 99.

☒ Banking/Finance ☐ Pharmaceuticals
☒ Textile ☐ Mining
☒ Automotive ☐ Agriculture
☒ Electronics ☐ Transportation
☒ Communication ☐ Manufacturing
☒ Entertainment ☐ Hotel/Lodging
☒ Health Care ☐ Education
☒ Technology ☐ Construction

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If you have any questions concerning how to select the industry type, please ask before the administrator starts the study. There will be no talking during the course of the study.

Please follow the administrator's instructions carefully as you are guided through the study.

Thank you for your assistance with this study!
REFERENCES

