

Educational Pathways in Marketing Programs for Undergraduate Students: Embedding Assessment Design to Address Threshold Concepts and Bridge the Gap Between Academia and Industry

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Abstract

The increasing demand for industry-ready graduates has underscored the need for assessment strategies that not only evaluate academic knowledge but also cultivate practical competencies. This action research study investigates how integrating Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) with Threshold Concepts can enhance assessment design in undergraduate marketing programs. Threshold concepts—transformative yet often troublesome ideas essential to disciplinary mastery—are explored through the lens of experiential learning, which emphasizes the cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The study focuses on Year 2 undergraduate marketing students at a British-system university in the UAE, employing a qualitative methodology to examine the impact of tailored, real-world assessment tasks. Data were gathered through classroom observations, student-teacher feedback sessions, and performance analysis across two academic semesters. These data points were aligned with stages of the experiential learning cycle, providing rich insights into how students internalize complex marketing concepts through hands-on practice, reflection, and iterative learning. Findings indicate that assessments grounded in experiential learning significantly improved student engagement, conceptual understanding, and career readiness. Students showed measurable performance gains in mastering threshold concepts such as market segmentation, branding, and strategic positioning. The iterative refinement of assessment design further ensured alignment with both academic outcomes and industry expectations. This study offers a replicable framework for embedding experiential and conceptually rich assessment strategies within marketing curricula. By bridging theory and practice, it addresses critical pedagogical gaps and contributes to the development of graduates equipped to navigate the dynamic challenges of the marketing profession.

Keywords: assessment design, threshold concept, experiential learning theory, marketing program

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Introduction

As global markets continue to evolve and marketing roles become increasingly dynamic, universities are under growing pressure to produce graduates who are not only theoretically grounded but also practically equipped to meet industry demands. Within this context, threshold concepts in marketing—such as segmentation, branding, and strategic positioning—represent essential yet often challenging areas of learning that students must master to progress meaningfully in the discipline (Meyer & Land, 2005). To address these conceptual barriers, this study incorporates Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) as a complementary pedagogical framework, emphasizing the role of real-world, reflective, and iterative learning experiences in fostering deeper understanding.

This action research investigates how embedding experiential, concept-focused assessment strategies within undergraduate marketing curricula can support students in overcoming troublesome knowledge and enhancing their career readiness. Conducted at a British-system university in the UAE, the study used qualitative methods including classroom observations, student feedback sessions, and performance analysis across two academic semesters. This dual-semester, iterative approach enabled the continuous refinement of assessment design and provided a robust, practice-informed understanding of how students internalize key marketing concepts through experiential learning.

Literature Review

Threshold Concepts in Marketing Education

Threshold concepts are core disciplinary ideas that, once understood, lead to a transformative shift in a student's comprehension and worldview (Meyer & Land, 2005). In the context of marketing education, these concepts typically include customer value, market segmentation, branding, and strategic positioning (Davies & Mangan, 2007). Mastery of these ideas is essential for both academic success and industry relevance. However, students often struggle to engage with these concepts because they are abstract, integrative, and contextually complex. Without meaningful pedagogical strategies, such concepts remain “troublesome knowledge,” impeding student progression and deeper understanding. Addressing these difficulties requires learning environments that make these ideas visible, actionable, and embedded in practice.

Assessment Design and Industry Alignment

Assessment design plays a critical role in shaping how students approach and internalize disciplinary knowledge. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) highlight the value of formative assessment in promoting self-regulated learning, while Carless (2015) emphasizes the role of feedback literacy in helping students prepare for professional environments. Assessments that replicate real-world marketing challenges—such as data-driven segmentation tasks or strategic brand positioning exercises—enable students to bridge theory and practice. When assessments are aligned with authentic, industry-relevant tasks, students are more likely to see the relevance of abstract concepts and engage with them meaningfully.

Experiential Learning in Undergraduate Marketing Programs

To further support the acquisition of threshold concepts, this study draws on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which provides a cyclical model of learning based on four key stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In marketing education, experiential learning is particularly effective because it mirrors the dynamic, iterative nature of professional marketing work. Activities such as group projects, simulated client pitches, and peer-reviewed case studies allow students to encounter marketing challenges directly (concrete experience), reflect on their performance and decisions (reflective observation), connect their experiences to theory (abstract conceptualization), and apply revised strategies in new contexts (active experimentation).

When integrated into assessment design, experiential learning fosters not only deeper cognitive engagement with threshold concepts but also the development of transferable skills such as collaboration, communication, and problem-solving. These approaches prepare students for the complexities of real-world marketing roles while simultaneously supporting academic mastery.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative action research methodology, grounded in cycles of implementation, observation, reflection, and iterative refinement. The approach was theoretically informed by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which conceptualizes learning as a continuous process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This lens enabled the study to systematically explore how experiential assessment strategies support students in mastering threshold concepts in marketing education.

Data were collected across two academic semesters using the following methods, each mapped to a corresponding stage of the experiential learning cycle:

- **Concrete Experience – Real-world Assessments:** Students engaged in group projects, case studies, and simulated marketing presentations designed to embed abstract concepts into practical tasks. These activities functioned as the “experience” phase, giving students direct encounters with key marketing challenges such as segmentation, branding, and positioning.
- **Reflective Observation – Feedback Sessions:** Mid- and end-semester group feedback discussions captured students’ reflections on the relevance, difficulty, and impact of the assessment tasks. These sessions provided insight into how students made sense of their experiences and identified obstacles in their conceptual understanding.
- **Abstract Conceptualization – Thematic Analysis:** Qualitative analysis of student reflections and performance trends helped identify patterns in learning progression. This analytical phase aligned with the ELT stage in which students begin to connect experience to broader theoretical frameworks.
- **Active Experimentation – Iterative Assessment Redesign:** Based on insights from performance data and feedback, assessment tasks were revised and re-implemented in the following semester. This phase supported continuous refinement of learning design and allowed both students and instructors to re-engage with tasks in new ways.

The sample included Year 2 undergraduate marketing students enrolled in a Consumer Behaviour module at a British-system university in the UAE. These students were chosen due to their transitional stage in the curriculum—having acquired foundational marketing knowledge but lacking real-world application experience. This positioning made them ideal participants for examining the impact of experiential, threshold-driven assessments on conceptual development and industry readiness.

Findings and Analysis

The findings are structured around three core threshold concepts identified as particularly challenging for students: market segmentation, branding, and strategic positioning. These were intentionally embedded into real-world, experiential assessment tasks designed to follow the four stages of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT): concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Assessment redesigns scaffolded these concepts through applied tasks, peer collaboration, and industry-relevant simulations.

Table 1

Threshold Concepts and Experiential Assessment Strategies

Threshold Concept	Assessment Strategy (Concrete Experience)	Observation & Reflection Outcome	Avg. Performance Improvement
Market Segmentation	Group project applying segmentation to a real brand	Students actively engaged with real consumer data; clearer link to theory through hands-on application	+18%
Branding	Case study analysis with peer feedback	Improved comprehension of brand identity; deeper reflection via peer discussion	+15%
Strategic Positioning	Client pitch simulation (presentation)	Increased confidence and ability to articulate positioning strategies in realistic contexts	+22%

These quantitative improvements were reinforced by qualitative insights gathered through feedback sessions and classroom observation. Students expressed a stronger connection between marketing theory and practical application. For example, during reflective discussions, one student shared, “Doing the pitch made me feel like I was in an agency—I finally understood what strategic positioning meant.”

Such reflections illustrate the transformative effect of assessment tasks designed through the experiential learning cycle. Students not only demonstrated improved performance but also internalized previously abstract concepts by actively engaging in authentic marketing scenarios. Furthermore, the iterative refinement of these assessments across two semesters supported active experimentation, where both students and faculty adapted and reapplied learning strategies based on observed outcomes.

The integrated approach of threshold-concept-focused content and experiential pedagogy fostered measurable learning gains, deeper conceptual clarity, and enhanced professional readiness among students.

Discussion

The findings reaffirm that assessment strategies aligned with threshold concepts can lead to transformative learning experiences. As Cousin (2006) argues, once students internalize these threshold concepts, their understanding of the subject undergoes a fundamental and irreversible shift. In this study, embedding concepts such as segmentation, branding, and strategic positioning within experiential, real-world assessments provided students with the necessary context to engage more deeply with disciplinary knowledge.

The integration of Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) further enriched this transformation. By structuring assessment tasks around Kolb's learning cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—students were not only exposed to practical challenges but also guided through reflective and conceptual stages that promoted lasting understanding. This alignment helped convert previously "troublesome" knowledge into actionable competence, as students moved from surface-level recall to applied mastery.

The iterative nature of action research played a vital role in the process. Cycles of feedback, performance analysis, and refinement enabled the ongoing alignment of assessment practices with both academic objectives and industry needs. These adaptations were responsive to student feedback and cohort-specific dynamics, ensuring that learning experiences remained relevant, inclusive, and developmental.

Moreover, the inclusion of peer review, formative feedback, and collaborative tasks encouraged students to engage in self-regulated and socially situated learning. These mechanisms helped students develop not only individual understanding but also key professional competencies such as teamwork, evaluation, and communication. Such outcomes reflect the dual purpose of the assessment model: fostering academic development and cultivating industry readiness.

In sum, the study demonstrates that embedding threshold concepts within an experiential learning framework—and refining it through action research—results in more engaged, capable, and confident learners. It bridges the divide between theory and practice, positioning students to succeed both in academic progression and future professional roles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates the value of embedding threshold concepts within an experiential learning framework to effectively bridge the gap between academic learning and industry expectations in undergraduate marketing education. By aligning assessment design with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle—through real-world application, structured reflection, and iterative refinement—students not only overcame troublesome knowledge but also developed critical professional competencies. The dual impact on conceptual mastery and career readiness highlights the importance of integrating theory and practice through purposeful pedagogical design.

The implications extend beyond the discipline of marketing, offering a transferable model for curriculum development in other fields seeking to align learning outcomes with evolving labor market demands. Through action research and responsive assessment design, institutions can foster learning environments that are adaptive, inclusive, and outcome-driven.

To enhance undergraduate education effectively, several research-informed and replicable strategies are recommended. First, assessments should be designed to embed threshold concepts within real-world, industry-relevant tasks—such as brand simulations, segmentation projects, and strategic positioning pitches—ensuring both conceptual clarity and practical application. This approach can be further strengthened by aligning assessments with Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, structuring tasks around the four-stage cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Additionally, promoting feedback literacy and peer learning is crucial; incorporating formative peer reviews, industry-style simulations, and feedback portfolios enables students to take ownership of their learning while developing evaluative judgment. Finally, adopting an iterative, data-informed approach to assessment design allows for continuous refinement through action research cycles, leveraging performance data and student reflections to better respond to learner needs and evolving professional standards. Together, these recommendations offer a strategic framework for embedding academic rigor, experiential engagement, and industry relevance into assessment practices, ultimately preparing graduates not only to navigate professional challenges but to lead within them.

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