

COUP D'ÉTAT

James Womick
Saint Leo University

The problem facing Dr. Poteat began as a student, who was seen by other students as a leader, approached Dr. Poteat and demanded to know why his class has so many more assignments than their other courses. Dr. Poteat informs the student that the course was designed by someone other than himself, and that he was simply following the prescribed syllabus.

SITUATION

It was late in the evening as Dr. Poteat sat in his small office with only the light of a dimly lit lamp shining on his hand as he fumbled the note he received from his class earlier in the day. The note was confusing and emotionally devastating. He pondered what he should do. How might he approach his class next? Should he consider exploring other career opportunities, seek counsel from more seasoned colleagues, or stick to his method of teaching?

Marketing 600 was not unlike any other principles of marketing course. It focused on some very specific fundamental outcomes. Course developers sought to familiarize students with the *raison d'être* for marketing, how marketing interacts with other business disciplines, the marketing mix framework for strategy development, and, the function of the brand. And since it is a graduate course, an appropriate level of rigor was appropriate.

Dr. Poteat was anxious to teach the course. He had recently retired from his position as a product manager for an international cosmetics firm, but felt, in his late-fifties, he was too young to sit at home and vegetate. While he was tired of the immense pressures and travelling that accompanied marketing occupations, he enjoyed the practice of marketing. He had risen from the ranks of a merchandiser for a well-known consumer packed goods manufacturer to heading the international division of a mid-sized health and beauty aids firm. His resume boasted how he blazed the trail for his employers to gain inroads into multicultural markets, and the increasingly lucrative European, African and Middle Eastern markets.

He had always been passionate about business in general and marketing particularly, perhaps since he had helped to support his family by juggling multiple small enterprises beginning in elementary school when he negotiated a deal with a

local garage owner to allow him to use a seldom occupied bay to wash cars. He and the garage owner agreed to share in the profits 50/50, and the owner would additionally supply the detergent, wax, and other items to conduct business. And, based on his graduate studies and volunteer work with the United States Small Business Administration (SBA), it was his considered opinion that far too many enterprises owned by women and minorities failed largely due to their lack of mastery of those proven fundamentals necessary to ignite and sustain an organization.

When Dr. Poteat was approached by a small liberal arts college that serviced adult learners, many of whom were active military or newly separated from service, he concluded that this would be an excellent institution from which he could build a legacy of service. It would well culminate his career in business. While he did not serve in the military, he relished the idea of teaching our service men and women, in addition to older students, how to plan and manage marketing campaigns.

THE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

St. Albans, the college that recruited Dr. Poteat, like many universities today offered nontraditional students a nontraditional method to achieve their degree. The airways were replete with commercials touting programs that could be completed in a portion of the time it would take in the traditional 16-week semester format. These programs suggest that their programs were more adult or military friendly. They promoted an understanding that they understood the demands of trying to hold a demanding fulltime job, manage a family, and complete studies. This message had great appeal to their target audience. It was a place that offered second chances to those who had not fared well early in their academic pursuits.

HIS “STANDARD CLASSROOM”

Teaching at a college or university was not new to Dr. Poteat. While working his fulltime job as a marketing manager, he taught as an adjunct at the local community college, in addition to various universities for about 30 years. He had taught courses in marketing principles, branding, international trade, and multiple other fundamental marketing topics. He had also been invited to conduct graduate workshops and seminars as a guest lecturer.

Students of all types had marched past Dr. Poteat, however it was clear to him that many of the students in this particular class were not committed to learning about business functions. Most took his class not because they wanted to, but because they had to as a means to earn their degree. This was not necessarily a new situation for the professor. Still, there seemed to be more students in this class with a disdain for marketing. They expressed in discussions how they viewed marketing as evil and only served to enrich the manufacturer.

He had no empirical evidence or anecdotal evidence leading him to any valid conclusion as to the attitudes of the students. However, one student confided in him that while he enjoyed the class, he was not going to do the massive amount of work required as laid out in the course syllabus. The student explained that he did not need to leverage the degree to get a job since he already had a good job. In fact, the student laughed that he made more money than Dr. Poteat in the professor's capacity as a teacher. Additionally, the student explained that many students eligible for educational benefits under the Montgomery/Post 911 GI bill were taking course to gain access to money. After all, they had put their lives on the line to defend America, why not take all that was available to you and support your family? Nonetheless, other students, or perhaps in conjunction, were enrolled because a degree enabled them to gain a higher position reserved for those with college degrees. However, it was their opinion that a mastery of marketing principles would not assist them at all.

Much to the professor's dismay, he felt that there was also a "band of brothers" attitude from other faculty and university staff that the unwritten rule was that if a student showed up, and completed assignments, they should pass the course, in many cases with grades indicating superior performance. However, no one informed Dr. Poteat of this policy du jour. Thus, he went about teaching the students in a way that he felt would give them a solid grounding in the subject matter.

STANDARD SYLLABUS POLICY

The university surprised Dr. Poteat with their "standard syllabus policy." This policy called for the professors to use the syllabus created by the course "owner." And, what students did not know or understand was that professors had little room to tinker with a course syllabus. Program administrators were firm in their directive that a professor could add assignments, but not eliminate work described in the master syllabus. This was a foreign concept to Dr. Poteat since at other institutions he had been given learning objectives but had been allowed professional latitude to construct syllabi that were focused on current issues and aligned with the teaching style of the teacher.

The course work for Marketing 600 entailed online discussion posts as well as in-class discussion contributions, quizzes, a midterm and final exam, several papers, and group assignments that included participation in a computer simulation game. Dr. Poteat thought the syllabus a bit much for adult learners, but he was new, and it was clear that rocking the boat was not a politically astute option. The students, of course, did not understand this fact. They felt that Dr. Poteat was trying to be a hard guy and prove his worth to the university by being tougher on students than

his peers. Students were beginning to be disgruntled and spread rumors that Dr. Poteat was not a professor whose course you wanted to take if you did not have an inordinate amount of time to spend on studying.

THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

During this time the President of the university communicated at the faculty assembly that the school was losing money and that the adult and military students were basically sustaining the school. This was not a time to alienated students, especially since researchers contended that the university had approximately 52 competitors for tuition of these particular students. And, many of these schools were stronger brands, having more recognized names and program reputations. Clearly, Dr. Poteat did not want to chase students away to other professors or universities. He, after all, was at the end of the day a working man who needed his wages to survive and seeking other employment would take time. Fulltime teaching positions did not grow on trees. Further, he wanted to find an “academic home” where he could relax, teach his course s, and do research.

He simply wanted to finish his career accomplished, yet, peacefully.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A COUP D’ÉTAT

Halfway into the eight-week term it was clear that the students were not happy with either the course or Dr. Poteat’s style, which incorporated lecture and business case analysis. Further, the university required graduate student to endure four-hour sessions. Thus, not only were student working a fulltime job, but then they had to come to class and sit for four hours per class. They seemed to feel, according to their end-of-term reviews, that the course was being taught much too fast, even though they understood that the course was designed to cover the same information in eight weeks that the 16-week course covered. Additionally, there appeared to be a general opinion by the students, and even the academic advisors that Dr. Poteat was teaching over their heads – even though students would not ask questions or meet with the assistant professor to clarify points of discussion.

THE SIMULATION – THE REAL NEMESIS

The primary project in the course was a team-based, computer simulation game provided by a third-party vendor. The game is focused on brand management and not the development of a marketing plan, as is the norm at many other schools of business. Dr. Poteat questioned this approach when he first reviewed the syllabus, especially since most of the students did not have a marketing background. He felt the game was more suited for a course on brand management, but again he did not want to come into the school making enemies based on a misunderstanding that he thought he was a better teacher than his peers.

Class after class, Dr. Poteat found himself displeased with the progress students were making, or not making. The simulation game had many moving parts and considerations that only those with some business or marketing background would assume. There was no question that the game was more suited to those having a successfully completed courses in financial management, marketing principles, basic accounting, and organizational behavior.

Developers of the game espoused that the game's purpose was to increase the student's knowledge of managing both an existing brand, in addition to creating product and line extensions when appropriate. Brand teams were assessed based on their ability to increase cumulative net profit and stock price over a period of time, in this case usually eight fiscal years.

Many of the student's decisions were void of logic. For instance, one team decided to raise their price 1000 percent in the first business period, even though the data suggested that their product's price was already considered high. Their misguided logic led them to conclude that since the case suggested that the brand had wide brand awareness, and that since there were few competitors that a tremendous price increase would not impede elasticity of demand, they would not lose customers, and increase revenue.

Another team with the same data took the polar opposite approach. They lowered their MSRP 50 percent with the idea that they could undercut the competition and grab market share. The result was a tremendous drop in their stock price and loss of consumer confidence.

Adding further to his dismay was the realization that few students had even bothered to read manual supplied by the developers, or any of the voluminous reports designed to give period insights on the industry, as well as customers and competitors. They were making decisions by the seat of their pants based little more than their gut, or perhaps the time available.

It was clearly time to have a discussion with the class on their approach to the game. He thought for days how he might talk to the students without demoralizing them. As he began his opening statement, a strange thing happened. A student who had been an Army officer, and quite moody in class, barked "Now," and three-fourths of the class stood. The standing students were on his team and others had clearly been recruited by the stern-faced student. The protesting students marched past with the former Army officer in a single file. The last one placed a bi-folded sheet of paper on the podium in front of Dr. Poteat as they walked out of the classroom. The leader of the protest gave Dr. Poteat a Clint Eastwood like glare and followed

closely behind the parade of students. The remaining students simply stared and filed sheepishly out one by one.

BACK IN DR. POTEAT'S OFFICE

The neatly folded paper stated that the class had a lack of confidence in the professor's ability to teach them, and that they were going to request his removal. Dr. Poteat was speechless. He was doing what he thought his employers required of him, and that they knew best because of their history is teaching this type of adult learner. Additionally, he felt badly due to his deep respect for his students and their journey. He, possibly because of his marketing background, considered the students, not as simply bags of tuition in human form that come and go through the halls, but more so as consumers of education. He passionately wanted them to learn and succeed.

Dr. Poteat was perplex. He did not know what to do, or whom to turn to for assistance. Still assimilating into the institution's culture, he did not feel particularly confident he had anyone in his corner who would advise him appropriately or cared about his success.