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Using imagination in management education: The case of actual jobs and imagined diaries



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Emre Tarim

Corresponding Author

Emre Tarim, Lancaster University, West Pavilion D65, Lancaster, England, LA1 4YX.

Email: e.tarim@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the often-neglected utility of imagination in management education and how imagination can help us narrow the teaching and practice gap. One way of utilising imagination for this purpose is using actual management jobs and encouraging students to apply taught material by writing imagined diaries on fulfilling responsibilities listed in job adverts. Using the case of an undergraduate marketing module at Lancaster University where I utilise this authentic approach by asking students to write imagined diaries on actual marketing jobs, I demonstrate how imagination help students understand the practical relevance of taught material to real-life problems, and how students benefit from an increased awareness of actual management issues, dynamics and demands. I conclude by reiterating the case for using imagination in authentic assessments and narrowing the teaching (theory) and practice gap in management that will benefit both management educators and students.

Keywords

Imagination, Job Adverts, Imagined Diary, Teaching and Practice Gap, Authentic Assessment

Imagination for authentic assessment

Authentic assessment goes beyond traditional exams and coursework that are designed to assess students' recall abilities with reference to taught material and allows students to apply their knowledge to addressing real management issues, dynamics and demands (Sokhanvar et al. 2021). Authentic assessment has therefore the potential to address what I call the teaching and practice gap in management education. This gap stems from teaching happening as an extension of individual management researchers' broad and specific research interests, cloaked under individual course and module titles, and their learning aims and outcomes. One consequence is that students are exposed to theoretical idiosyncrasies and fragmentations of management research(ers) without a meaningful idea on this exposure's utility for their future

careers in terms of knowledge, skills and behaviours, if there is any. This is a grave problem, given the often lamented but unresolved issue of the considerable theory and practice gap in management research (Ryder 2024). One way to account for our own teaching practice and take steps to address these issues, which unsurprisingly are detrimental to our students, is to use imagination as a pedagogic device and authentic assessment method. The latter helps students improve their employability skills, while the former allows us to consider the relevance of our teaching (read research) interest to management practice.

Imagination is defined as “the ability to form mental pictures of people or things, or to have new ideas” (Cambridge Dictionaries, n.d.). Imagination is fundamental to our cognitive and social development as human beings (Egan 1992). Imagination, through non-experiential (e.g., storytelling, introspection) and experiential (e.g., role play, simulation) methods, helps us to apply, appraise, and consolidate our extant knowledge, and develop it through transporting it to new contexts (Sokhanvar et al. 2021). One phenomenon that can act as an easily accessible tool for the management scholar in any pedagogic effort to incorporate imagination is job adverts. Job adverts, freely available on company websites and career platforms, reveal what are otherwise hidden processes, relations, expectations, and technologies in contemporary businesses. Management theory does not have a consensus on why modern businesses are alike (e.g., why we have a job function called product marketing management) as they debate whether it results from institutional isomorphism or functional necessity (see Luhmann and Cunliffe 2013 for a review). Yet, they agree that contemporary businesses are alike.

As such, job adverts give insights into current management issues, practices and demands, crucial to start narrowing the teaching and practice gap in management. Job adverts can thus be used as a source in authentic teaching and assessment when combined with a non-experimental and/or experimental method for imagination. This is because, when combined with a distinctive imagination-based method, job adverts can help students professionally and emotionally transport themselves into professional settings. An imagined diary on the job, which is what I use in my teaching, constitutes a non-experiential method as it does not rely on experiential methods such simulation or roleplay involving multiple students and job advert(s) (positions and/or job task). Nonetheless, despite their differences most palpable in assessment scaffolds and evaluation methods (e.g., experimental methods generally entailing team-work), both methods utilise imagination, which acts as a proxy of how we use ‘metacognition’ through our tacit, experiential, and theoretical knowledge to fulfil real-life responsibilities (Sokhanvar et al. 2021). An imagined diary thus constitutes a good proxy of considering and approximating these processes, from deliberation, through action, to appraising actions and consequences.

Using job adverts and imagined diaries in a final year marketing module

Motivated by these, I introduced a coursework assessment based on actual job adverts to my final year Undergraduate (UG) marketing management module in 2019. The coursework encouraged students to go for any indefinite marketing management jobs anywhere in the world that they were interested in and excited about in their burgeoning marketing careers as students of marketing. To make the coursework relevant to students’ career interests, I structured the coursework into two different parts.

In the first part, I ask students to research internal and external dynamics of the job and company chosen (e.g., organisational structure, relations with stakeholders, competition, current issues in the company/sector), making use of the job advert, and primary and secondary resources at our disposal through the library and the university.

In the second part of the coursework, I ask students to choose two job responsibilities as listed in the advert and write an imagined diary in the post, recounting how they worked towards fulfilling those responsibilities in their first month in the job.

For the concluding part, I ask them to recap their first month in the job and express their feelings for the coming months. The incorporation of feelings was not on a whim. As taught in the module, and in feedforward to students, feelings and emotions (e.g., fear, frustration, anger, joy) are part of the managerial decision-process (March and Simon 1993), and as such should be accounted for.

The core aspect of the assessment, especially from a summative perspective, is how well the students could account for their imagined conduct in the first month using the theories on managerial judgements and behaviours learned in the module. Accordingly, I underline the creative licence the student has in (imagining) fulfilling the selected responsibilities and writing their diaries. This creative licence, as reminded to students in written and oral feedforward on different aspects of the coursework, should be informed by their marketing management knowledge learned through taught material and experiences so far in their UG degrees, and should respect the realm of possibilities in modern businesses and marketing. This realm includes success, failure, stalemates, frustrations, celebrations. As such, I underline the importance of not having a success bias in their imagination.

The benefits of combining real-life management phenomenon such as job adverts and imagination in formative and summative assessments, and more generally in the classroom mainly come from how imagination deploys metacognition and focus it on a real-life issue, dynamic or demand. It allows students to evaluate their tacit, experiential and taught knowledge in terms of relevance and applicability and then formulate and apply a course of action through experiential (e.g., simulation, role-play) and/or non-experiential (e.g., diaries, methods for imagination). I do not limit the use of imagination to job adverts and non-experiential imagination method only. In the same module, I provide students with formatively assessed tasks based on real-life marketing issues and demands such as devising a marketing plan for a real-life business, innovating and marketing a product/service to solve a real-life issue that they face as consumers. Altogether, these authentic assessments help students learn how their marketing knowledge so far in their UG careers can be applied to real-life issues, dynamics and demands in contemporary organisations and markets. Students also acknowledge this kind of benefit, as neatly captured in one written feedback on the module:

“It was genuinely inspiring to imagine how we might use what we have learned in our futures - this is something that is missing from most modules.”

Conclusion

Imagination-based formative and summative assessments using real-life issues, dynamics and demands are possible by making use of job adverts and other real-life management phenomena. Such authentic assessments allow students apply tacit, experiential and taught knowledge to real-life, and help them develop metacognition on knowledge and practice in modern management contexts and careers. They can also act as another pedagogic tool for the management scholar to consider and reduce the teaching (theory) and practice gap too.

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Author Profile

Emre Tarim is a Lecturer in Behavioural Sciences at Lancaster University Management School. As an educator and researcher on human behaviour in markets and marketing, Emre is passionate about developing a marketing pedagogy that empowers future marketing managers with behavioural, organisational and institutional knowledge, awareness and reflection.

ORCID iDs

Emre Tarim <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5965-3709>

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