The Brand Project: Reinvention of a Principles of Marketing Course for the Digital Age

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Digital technologies have fundamentally changed the way people interact and has transformed how students access information, collaborate and learn. For The Brand Project, the instructor redesigned a Marketing course for the digital age. Students reported enjoying the project more than lectures or papers, expending a great deal of effort, and integrating knowledge. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to examine new technologies, consider how to incorporate them into our classroom, apply these technologies using theoretical frameworks, and measure their effectiveness. Doing so can inspire "digital natives" to engage with us beyond the traditional classroom pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies, including social networking sites (SNS), wiki's, and blogs have seen significant growth in the past decade (Granitz & Koernig, 2011). These technologies have fundamentally changed the way people interact with each other and their environment. As a result of the digital revolution, educators are experiencing a transformation of how our "digital native" students access information, collaborate and learn (McHaney, 2013). A key educational tool has become students' smartphones. According to the 2014 EDUCAUSE Eligibility and Certification Approval Report (ECAR) Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology in Higher Education, 86% of undergraduates own a smartphone (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014). Given the high rate of adoption of mobile learning devices, and the importance of these devices to students, the study advised "designing course activities and assignments that use mobile devices to deepen engagement for students… to harness the power of these tools as academic resources rather than distractions" (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014, p. 20). More recently, EDUCAUSE also released a "Top 10 Strategic Technologies" report, which identified the most strategic technologies institutions will spend the most time "implementing, planning and tracking" during 2017 (Schaffhauser, 2017). Active learning classrooms ranked number one, with integration of mobile devices in teaching and learning ranking number four (Schaffhauser, 2017).

In the field of marketing, educators are recognizing the importance of teaching students the appropriate skills they will use to manage communication with stakeholders and make complex data-driven marketing decisions (Granitz & Koernig, 2011). In an attempt to meet the demand for a workforce competent to meet the challenges of the information age, researchers are calling on marketing departments within higher education to transform their curricula from the traditional teacher-centered classroom focus to a more modern, student-centered focus (Granitz & Koernig, 2011; Granitz & Pitt, 2011; Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2009; Wymbs, 2011).

The Brand Project

The challenge instructors face is incorporating technology in a manner that results in increases student engagement and learning. For *The Brand Project,* the instructor redesigned a Principles of Marketing course for the digital age by utilizing L. Dee Fink's Significant Learning Experiences Taxonomy and applying digital tools to achieve each objective. Digital tools used included video-production technology, social media, the SurveyMonkey® survey instrument, Kahoot® interactive classroom quiz tool, Apple AirPlay®, among others. These applications of Fink's Taxonomy transformed the course pedagogy for a Principles of Marketing class to utilize the tools of the modern age. To measure success, the instructor has tracked student engagement, perceived learning, and instructor effectiveness ratings for the past four semesters.

The Brand Project is a semester-long project in a Principles of Marketing course offered at a small, Midwestern college, where class sizes are approximately 30 students per section. Principles of Marketing is business students' required introductory course in marketing where they are first exposed to the subject. For business majors, Principles of Marketing may be the only course students take in the marketing discipline. This is an important class, as it helps students discern whether a marketing major or minor is of interest to them (Camey & Williams, 2004). Therefore, it is important to expose students to a broad range of marketing concepts and practices providing foundational learning that will be sustainable.

In the marketing field, experiential learning theory (ELT) is often used as a foundation for course design, research studies, and creative pedagogical techniques (Gray, Peltier, & Schibrowsky, 2012). In this model, Kolb defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984 p. 194). Experiential learning theory emphasizes customized, interactive, non-linear learning in which the student is an active participant in the learning process. Well-designed experiential learning courses should result in a more engaging student experience with high student involvement, personal commitment, and high self-perceptions of learning (Frontczak, 1998). *The Brand Project* was built using ELT as the theoretical foundation.

The course was transformed using Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning as the learning model. Fink's taxonomy is grounded in the adaption of learning techniques for the modern information age. Fink envisioned courses in which students are engaged in their learning, have a high energy level, and value their learning long after the course is over, resulting in significant and lasting internal change (Fink, 2003). This vision is supported in the literature and is consistent with the needs of businesses for graduates skilled in adapting to the new realities of the information age (McHaney, 2013). To this end, Fink's taxonomy is based on six general categories of learning that, unlike Bloom's hierarchical approach to learning, are interactive: Foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn (Fink, 2003, 2007). Table 1 summarizes how each dimension was incorporated in *The Brand Project*.

TABLE 1
FINKS TAXONOMY APPLIED TO THE BRAND PROJECT

Finks Taxonomy Dimension	Definition	Pedagogical Practices	Assignments
Caring	Feelings, interests, values	Twitter direct messages One-on-one and group meetings	Required group meetings and individual meetings with instructor to review writing and presentation
Learning to Learn	Self-directed learning	Students select brand and follow this brand and industry leaders on social media	Weekly Twitter assignments, in-class discussion and student presentations via Apple Airplay, Students created and presented their own video on the brand
Human Dimension	Learning about self and others	Twitter discussion groups of students with brands in same industry Student reflections in groups and on Twitter	Field trip and guest speakers with reflection papers Required student interaction on marketing topics on Twitter
Integration	Connecting ideas, people, realms of life	Instructor tweets links to relevant articles from industry sources. Twitter feed on LMS home page	Individual paper and group presentation required multiple sources Frequent student "competitions" for extra credit (i.e. new product development, IMC pitch)
Application	Skills, thinking, management	Apply brand knowledge to primary research project	Create and analyze survey via SurveyMonkey® and collect responses via social media
Foundational Knowledge	Understanding and remembering information and ideas	Weekly assignments, paper and project linked to relevant chapters in textbook	Link paper and presentation assignments directly to chapters from textbook

The specific goals of *The Brand Project* were as follows:
- Transition student's view of marketing from a consumer to a professional perspective;
- Encourage student engagement through the opportunity to gaining expertise in viewing marketing concepts through their individual brand lens;
- Relate marketing theory and principles to that brand's marketing communications;
- Understand how Integrated Marketing Communications are utilized by brands to enhance brand profitability and presence;
- Utilize marketing research online tools to enhance students' empirical reasoning skills;
- Improve student's writing and research skills;
- Create a learning environment where students gain insights into the marketing discipline through meaningful small and large group interactions.

During this semester-long project, students selected a brand they had experienced as a consumer and were interested in researching from a list of industries determined by the professor (e.g. snack foods, technology, athletic apparel). Industries were chosen based upon the amount of industry data available from library databases and interest level of the students. Students were also grouped by industry (four students per group) for class projects and Twitter discussion groups. The instructor created a series of integrated assignments that were tied to the learning outcomes for each textbook chapter. An overview of the major assignments is listed in the appendix. These assignments included the following:

1. A student-produced video highlighting the marketing messages of the brand. This initial assignment allowed the student to introduce their brand to the class in an often humorous, non-threatening way. Students utilized video-production capabilities on their mobile devices to create the 30-60 second videos and showed them to the class via Apple AirPlay®.

2. Twitter-based assignments. Students followed their selected brand on social media sites and completed weekly, Twitter-based interactive assignments within their industry group based on a weekly topic which was aligned with the textbook chapters, and regularly shared their findings with the class via Apple AirPlay®.

3. A major (10 page) individual research paper. Students conducted significant secondary research using both library databases for quantitative findings, and social media for qualitative insights into consumer opinions. At midterm, each student submitted a marketing research paper on his/her brand that addressed the following sections: Marketing Strategy, Marketing Environment, Consumer Behavior, and Target Market. The content of this paper is similar to that of a market analysis commonly developed by marketing managers working in the industry. To aid students with this paper, the instructor invited the librarian to class to discuss database access, source validity, and APA formatting. In addition, the instructor invited a member of the writing center staff to discuss their role in helping students with writing research papers. Students then followed a four-step writing process:

   a. Students were required to meet with either a library staff member or writing center tutor and obtain a signature on their annotated bibliography signifying the student had been tutored on the accuracy of their APA citations and the validity of the sources.

   b. The instructor met with each student to review the annotated bibliography. These individual meetings with students served as a formative assessment tool prior to the rough draft due date. The instructor was able to identify areas of weakness in the research and coach students toward additional sources.

   c. Students conducted an in-class peer review of papers using Google Docs within their product category using a detailed peer review form. The instructor was able to monitor the review process to ensure student compliance.

   d. The instructor required a rough draft worth one-third of the total points of the paper. Extensive written feedback was given, with specific areas for improvement noted.

   e. The final draft was due via the Turn-it-In tool to dissuade plagiarism. The final draft was graded via a detailed rubric, with general comments given to the students.

   f. Student papers receiving an A grade were invited to present their research at the college's student research symposium.

4. Student contests for bonus points. Students completed in four industry group pitch contests covering marketing ethics, STP, new product innovation and IMC. These pitches were judged by their classmates via a live survey tool.

5. A final hour-long interactive group presentation. At the end of the semester, students presented a comprehensive group analysis by industry comparing and contrasting each brand's marketing mix strategies within the industry. As part of this analysis, students created and executed a primary research survey using the free version of survey software at *surveymonkey.com*. The college's Institutional Research Board approved a standard survey format and informed consent statement, and thus the instructor was allowed to use this survey format with adjustments for student's brands. Students analyzed the data from their convenience survey both individually and within

their categories creating presentation charts comparing important criteria such as price and quality attributes across brands. As part of the final presentation, students often used technologies such as Kahoot® to create an interactive classroom-based quiz.

Since introducing *The Brand Project* in Spring, 2015, student response data has been collected using a perceived learning survey previously validated by Kaplan (2009) in a marketing classroom (Kaplan et al., 2009). Responses have been consistently strong across all three semesters tested (Spring 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2016) and are combined and presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
MEAN RATINGS OF SELECT STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE BRAND PROJECT

Survey Item	Mean N=103		% Agree/Strongly Agree
Using Web technologies in a project is enjoyable	3.88		78
This project helped me realize practical applications of marketing theory	3.73		71
Project should be assigned to future classes	3.68		77
Project enhanced my awareness of marketing	3.83		75
Compared to writing a term paper, this project was more interesting	3.91		73
As a learning experience the project was more productive than a lecture	3.83		75
I did research on various sources to perform better on this project	4.04		84
I put a great deal of effort into this project	3.95		75
This project enhanced writing communication skills	3.65		72
I integrated knowledge from other courses into this project	3.73		72
Standard Likert scale used where 5=strongly agree and 1=strongly disagree			

Students showed broad agreement to questions regarding *The Brand Project's* ability to meet course objectives, and also reported enjoying the project more than lectures or term papers. Students also reported expending a great deal of effort, and integrating knowledge from other courses. *The Brand Project* also achieved the project goals of transitioning student's view of marketing from a consumer to a professional perspective; encouraging student engagement; understand the benefits of marketing to business; utilizing technology effectively; improving student's writing and research skills; and creating a positive learning environment.

Discussion

The Brand Project represents an innovative approach to teaching marketing that utilizes technology to enhance student learning. Rather than simply adding the latest popular technology to a current assignment, the instructor redesigned the entire course to create an integrated approach. The approach is comprehensive and based on the best understanding of course design in the information age. Measures of student enjoyment, perceived learning and actual learning outcomes indicate the success of this project. *The Brand Project* concept could be adapted for marketing courses at all levels. The differing approaches to marketing by brands in similar industries provided significant fodder for lively class discussion leading to excellent course engagement and learning. In addition, the composite mean instructor effectiveness rating (as measured by adapting the IDEA form to the end of class survey) was positive (*M*= 4.02 on a standard 5-point Likert scale) indicating students found the instruction effective.

Over the course of the four semesters *The Brand Project* has been taught, the instructor has relied on both quantitative and qualitative feedback from students, as well as continually tweaking or trying newly discovered technologies to continue to improve upon the course. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to continue to carefully examine new technologies, consider how they might be incorporated into our classroom, apply these technologies using the theoretical frameworks applicable to our field of study and measure their effectiveness. Although applying new technologies in our classrooms can be frightening, challenging and often, frustrating, it also can engage and inspire these "digital natives" to engage with us beyond the traditional classroom pedagogy.

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APPENDIX

Relevant Assignments from Course Syllabus

Favorite Brand Project

Each student will pick a favorite national or international brand that he/she likes, has experience using as a consumer, and is interested in researching. The purpose of this project is based on scientific research! You will learn and retain marketing concepts better if you can apply them to knowledge you already have about a brand. No two students are allowed to choose the same brand, and brands will be assigned on a first come, first served basis. Students can choose any brand in the following industries – breakfast cereal, personal care (bodywash/shampoo), carbonated soft drinks, online retailers, protein-type bars, video-streaming services. Brands must be approved by the instructor. The brand chosen must be actively marketed on both online and in mass media. Students will be expected to utilize the scientific method to research the brand's marketing of the 4 "P's" of the marketing mix- product, price, place and promotion, and be able to discuss their brand's marketing during class discussion on a weekly basis. In addition, an introductory video "ad", an individual research paper, an ongoing team discussion on Moodle (and/or Twitter) and a formal team presentation will be required on the students' brands.

Undergraduate Research - The Marketing Environment Paper and Survey Research

Students will conduct secondary research to understand the marketing environment of their brand using the college online databases, company materials, and other sources. Each student will complete an individual paper presenting their results. Papers are to use APA style, and will be used as the mid-point writing assessment for the major. Students will be conducting peer reviews on Google Docs, and will submit a first draft to receive feedback one week before the final due date. I will request individual meetings with students needing extra instruction, or for any students wanting one-on-one feedback. Students submitting superior papers may be asked to present at the Palmer Research Symposium, Spring, 2017. Students will also conduct primary research utilizing a free account on SurveyMonkey® to create and execute an online survey. Survey results will be presented as part of their team industry presentation.

Team Industry Project

Based on the brands selected, I will assign students to groups of approximately 5-6 students with similar brand characteristics. These students will work together to create a joint presentation of their brands and the category. The final presentation will integrate the learning concepts from the entire course into a 60-minute interactive, multimedia presentation to the class. This purpose of this assignment is to help students integrate and synthesize many of the marketing concepts discussed in class, and practice their oral communication skills.