

Blended Learning in Marketing Education: Using Alumni Experiences to Increase Student Motivation

A. Estima
University of Aveiro

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both teachers and students underwent significant adaptation and flexibility in higher education courses. The literature documenting these experiences has grown extensively, with educators highlighting challenges and opportunities in distance learning formats. These reports are crucial to understanding how forced adaptations resulted in more productive activities for students than we had thought of before. These experiences also hold fundamental importance for deriving insights for the future, serving as valuable lessons for colleagues to draw inspiration from and apply them to their disciplines. This article describes an experience developed in an introductory Marketing subject that, due to university directives, adopted a blended learning regime during COVID-19. What started as a problem turned into an opportunity. An alumni engagement activity was devised to enhance student motivation — an undertaking that would have been challenging in an exclusively classroom-based setting. This activity became essential, elevating student motivation, promoting new experiences, facilitating networking, and encouraging collaborative work.

Keywords: marketing education, blended learning, alumni, students' motivation

INTRODUCTION

Different distance learning methodologies, particularly blended learning, have garnered considerable attention in the literature regarding teaching methodologies, primarily due to their transformative potential (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The undeniable advantages of blended learning are well-documented, with numerous articles talking about its challenges (Li, 2022), impacts (Iqbal et al., 2022), and factors influencing adoption and implementation (Al-Ayed & Al-Tit, 2021; Dakduk et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the literature is rich with examples of teaching experiences ranging from more to less successful, employing this methodology across various fields of study (e.g., Finlay et al., 2022), educational levels, and diverse audiences (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015). Over time, blended learning has consistently proven to be a credible and advantageous alternative, fostering student motivation, and encouraging diverse learning approaches. It challenges students to further develop competencies, ultimately expanding its reach to new audiences.

Business education is no exception to this trend with several authors (e.g. Pavlidou et al., 2021; Sarfraz et al., 2022), highlighting successful experiences using this methodology and envisioning the future of education through technology (Serafim-Silva et al., 2022).

Blended learning and technology integration in the classroom had already been identified as the new normal in higher education, even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Fernandes et al., 2016). As early as

2004, authors such as Garrison and Kanuka (2004) foresaw that “blended learning is an effective and low-risk strategy which positions universities for the onslaught of technological developments that will be forthcoming in the next few years” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96).

Few people anticipated that these methodologies would evolve into the ‘only’ solution for education. With the emergence of the 2020 pandemic, these approaches became a primary solution, ensuring both quality education and safety for students and teachers. Literature has witnessed a significant surge in experiences and innovative applications of this methodology (e.g. Garone et al., 2022; Rao & Vijayalakshmi, 2022; Robson et al., 2022).

But what exactly does blended learning mean? “At its simplest, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96) and it “implies a mixture of traditional teaching methods and e-learning activities” (Al-Ayed & Al-Tit, 2021, p. 268). This methodology leverages the full spectrum of educational possibilities technology offers, seamlessly incorporating them with proven best practices from face-to-face teaching (Castro, 2019).

This article describes an experience developed in an introductory marketing course compelled by university management to adopt a blended learning approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. The beginning was challenging as it presented a new scenario for all involved. However, what initially posed a problem evolved into an opportunity. To enhance student motivation and class engagement, an alumni contact activity – a venture that would have proven immensely challenging within the confines of traditional classroom-based instruction. Surprisingly, this activity emerged as the focal point of the course, increasing students’ motivation, fostering new experiences, facilitating networking, and encouraging different learning methods, and collaborative work. These findings align with other research and alumni engagement experiments (Darwin, 2015).

THE PROBLEM

The academic year 2020/2021 stands out as one of the most confusing to date, marked by successive changes in government restrictions. Striving to strike a balance between the evolving pandemic and the imperative to restore normality, higher education institutions (HEIs) sought to adapt classes. They aimed to facilitate the return of students to the classroom while mitigating the risk of a surge in COVID-19 cases. In addition to implementing basic safety measures such as mask usage, space disinfection, and ventilation, maintaining social distancing among students in the classroom became imperative. This necessitated the division of classes to adhere to safety protocols, with a mandatory reduction in the number of students per class.

The initiative reported in this paper was developed within the framework of an introductory marketing course in the marketing undergraduate degree program. The course comprised two sessions – one held during daytime hours and the other during night / post-labor hours (4 contact hours for each). In response to the imperative of minimizing the effects of class division on the distribution of teaching responsibilities, the school management implemented a solution. This involved scheduling one class with two contact hours during the day and another with two contact hours in the evening. A novel approach was adopted to accommodate the remaining two hours: a combined online class conducted on Saturday mornings, bringing together approximately 80 students from both sessions.

This decision imposed several challenges on the teacher, including i) the scheduling on Saturday, affecting the weekend for those who already had classes throughout the week, particularly impactful for working students; ii) the class being held from 11 am to 1 pm, immediately following another class, intensifying the workload; iii) the students, being from different classes, had limited familiarity with one another; iv) the imperative for perfect alignment in the schedules of the two weekly classes to ensure uniform subject coverage on Saturdays; v) a significant decrease in student class participation during the online session; vi) all the typical problems associated with distance learning.

After three weeks of classes, it became evident that students were experiencing demotivation in attending and participating in Saturday classes. In response, various strategies were experimented with,

drawing inspiration from recommendations in the literature: i) adjusting the class to be more theoretical and emphasizing practical work during face-to-face sessions; ii) adopting the opposite approach, engaging students in simultaneous activities through Zoom and making Saturday classes more practical; iii) incorporating multiple quizzes throughout the class to sustain student motivation and involvement; iv) integrating small presentations and conducting online research during the class. While these strategies showed some incremental improvements, the level of engagement still fell short of the typical involvement observed in this subject in previous years. As the initial course in the marketing scientific area, it traditionally garners significant interest and participation from students, consistently receiving high evaluations within the University's assessment system.

As one of the first subjects in the core area of marketing, a primary objective is to introduce the students to the technical terminology associated with business and marketing. Simultaneously, the course aims to underscore the significance of the marketing function and elucidate the various opportunities within this field. Recognizing the importance of this objective and building on past endeavors to enhance class motivation and participation, a solution was devised that surpassed expectations: initiating informal Saturday morning discussions with alumni from the marketing degree program. This approach proved to be remarkably successful, exceeding initial expectations.

THE SOLUTION

The chosen solution involved organizing conversations with alumni of the marketing degree. In preparation for this initiative, the following steps were undertaken:

1. The idea was introduced to students from both classes, involving discussions on potential themes, professionals to invite, and a name for the initiative:
 - a. From the beginning, the students were very receptive to the idea, giving suggestions and sharing their opinions. To determine a name, small groups were formed which suggested in total of around 10 names, then a vote was taken in an online poll and the name with the most votes was MarkTalk. The entire group was pleased with the final name, understanding that it was a strong name that accurately reflected the activity. One of the students volunteered to design a logo which can be seen in Figure 1.
 - b. Regarding the topics to be addressed in the classes, students highlighted the diverse professional backgrounds of the alumni, emphasizing distinctions in roles and sectors of activity. This input influenced the selection of discussion topics to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the varied experiences and insights the alumni could offer.
2. Contact and invite alumni:
 - a. This step was under the responsibility of the lecturer, given the close contact with the alumni.
 - b. A total of six alumni were extended invitations, which entailed sharing class time from six Saturdays.
 - c. A briefing was made to each of them, with the objectives of the conversation and the maximum time, which was set at 45 minutes. This ensured a structured and time-efficient engagement for each session.

FIGURE 1
LOGO OF THE INITIATIVE CREATED BY A STUDENT OF THE CLASS.



All alumni promptly accepted the invitation and expressed high enthusiasm for the upcoming sessions. They actively contributed by suggesting themes and proposing engaging dynamics for the discussions. Consequently, a schedule was established, assigning each alumnus to a distinct Saturday. The profiles of the alumni are detailed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1
ALUMNI PROFILES**

Position	Years of Experience	Professional Sector
Head of Sales	10	Automotive Sector
Marketing Manager	3	Industrial Automation
Account Manager	2	Communication Agency
Digital Marketing Consultant	3	Consultancy
Head of Marketing	4	Food & Beverages
Marketing Director	10	Coffee Machinery Manufacturing

Both the positions, professional sector and experience are very diverse. The deliberate intention was to curate a selection that maximizes diversity in life and career paths. This approach sought to serve as a source of inspiration for students in their academic courses and future endeavors. The varied backgrounds aimed to offer students a comprehensive perspective, fostering motivation and enriching their understanding of potential career trajectories.

RESULTS

What initially began as an initiative to enhance student engagement and motivation evolved into a unifying activity for the entire subject. In the week preceding each session, students received information about the invited alumnus, including their name and the respective company, allowing for prior research and preparation.

Guests were given the option to commence with a brief introductory presentation before transitioning to a question-and-answer format or to directly engage in conversation. Each alumnus provided a concise overview detailing their professional journey to its current stage. Additionally, they shared insights from their undergraduate experiences, offering valuable advice on navigating the course and leveraging the opportunities presented by the University.

The primary outcome to underscore is the notable engagement of students who consistently activated their cameras during the interactive sessions. From the inaugural session, the discourse transcended a mere focus on the guest, evolving into a more substantive exchange. Students began posing questions that bridged the content covered in the week's instruction to the guest's professional experience. They sought examples of industry-related activities and insights into the practical applicability of the concepts they had been studying. This shift demonstrated a heightened level of interaction and a keen interest in drawing real-world connections to their academic coursework.

Consequently, the originally planned 45-minute sessions began encompassing the two-hour class period. Given this shift, it became imperative to introduce flexibility into the scheduling and enhance (even more) class preparation. Collaborative efforts were initiated with the week's guest to determine specific topics to cover, aligning with their areas of expertise. This proactive approach ensured a more tailored and effective utilization of the extended class time, accommodating the in-depth discussions and spontaneous interactions that had become integral to the sessions.

For instance, in the context of the segmentation subject, an alumnus possessing substantial experience in the automotive sector could provide concrete illustrations of the concept's applicability and success through practical examples. This instance highlights how insights from professionals in the field contribute credibility to the subject matter being taught.

At the end of the course unit, students eagerly shared their reflections on this experience. Here are a few statements:

- *“As a 1st-year student, I loved being part of this initiative and thank our teacher for making time from her classes available for developing this project. I also appreciate the contribution of all my fellow alumni. One of the reasons why I chose the Marketing course was its transversality and you undoubtedly managed to show us that and motivate me even more, not only for the course but for my future!”*
- *“Excellent initiative! As a student, it was great to have the opportunity to know a little better the career path of former ISCA Marketing students, serving as motivation for the future! Thanks to all participants and our teacher for providing this Marktalk!”*
- *“Congratulations on a spectacular initiative. Thank you to all those involved and especially to the teacher for providing us with such an enlightening experience for the future.”*

Also, for the alumni, the experience was highly rewarding. On one hand, they conveyed the joy of returning to the university where they pursued their studies. On the other hand, the opportunity to provide advice and guidance to fellow students navigating similar experiences was profoundly fulfilling.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the numerous benefits of blended learning in teaching (Castro, 2019; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Serafim-Silva et al., 2022), implementing this approach in this instance was not a choice but a necessity imposed by circumstances. The entire subject had to be reconfigured, and the experience reported here emerged as a contingency plan, developed in response to the escalating demotivation observed in the online class during the initial weeks. While the imposition and the challenging context could have resulted in a negative experience, the overall outcome was successful.

The execution of this strategy demanded significant flexibility and compromise from the teacher. It was concluded that preparing a subject of such significance, shaping students' perception of their field of study, requires continuous attention and a willingness to adapt lessons when challenges arise. The involvement of students from the outset was deemed crucial. Acknowledging the difficulties and demotivation felt by students, the message emphasized that what mattered most was achieving the subject's learning outcomes, not necessarily the learning method.

The choice of alumni considered their diverse professional and personal experiences, along with their communication and empathy skills. Trust in the speakers played a fundamental role in ensuring the initiative's success. The informal conversations contributed to a comfortable environment where students felt at ease asking questions and sharing concerns.

While this pedagogical example was integrated into the curriculum, alumni involvement proved to be a 'secret weapon' for teaching. Their ability to relate to the subject being taught and to the students' current experiences in the degree, along with representing future possibilities, provided valuable vision and inspiration. In marketing, these sessions assisted students in making informed choices and finding models for their future.

In conclusion, the key advantages of this experience included a substantial increase in motivation, a significant improvement in student involvement (e.g., increased camera usage during lessons), the application of practical cases to illustrate subjects, guidance on study approaches, and the facilitation of networking beneficial for future careers. The subject received an excellent grade of 8.28 out of 9, considering its initial challenges. The activity was regarded as a highlight in the students' qualitative evaluation, with the recommendation to repeat it during the degree. Identifying professionals and alumni who walked the same path motivated for students to continue their academic journey.

REFERENCES

- Al-Ayed, S.I., & Al-Tit, A.A. (2021). Factors affecting the adoption of blended learning strategy. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 5(3), 267–274. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ijdns.2021.6.007>
- Castro, R. (2019). Blended learning in higher education: Trends and capabilities. *Education and Information Technologies*, 24(4), 2523–2546. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-09886-3>
- Dakduk, S., Santalla-Banderali, Z., & van der Woude, D. (2018). Acceptance of blended learning in executive education. *SAGE Open*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018800647>
- Darwin, A. (2015). Graduates giving back – A mentoring program for MBA students. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 4(3), 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-03-2015-0009>
- Deschacht, N., & Goeman, K. (2015). The effect of blended learning on course persistence and performance of adult learners: A difference-in-differences analysis. *Computers and Education*, 87, 83–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.020>
- Fernandes, J., Costa, R., & Peres, P. (2016). Putting order into our universe: The concept of blended learning - A methodology within the concept-based terminology framework. *Education Sciences*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci6020015>
- Finlay, M.J., Tinnion, D.J., & Simpson, T. (2022). A virtual versus blended learning approach to higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of a sport and exercise science student cohort. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, 30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100363>
- Garone, A., Bruggeman, B., Philipsen, B., Pynoo, B., Tondeur, J., & Struyven, K. (2022). Evaluating professional development for blended learning in higher education: A synthesis of qualitative evidence. *Education and Information Technologies*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-10928-6>
- Garrison, D.R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>
- Iqbal, J., Asghar, M.Z., Ashraf, M.A., & Yi, X. (2022). The impacts of emotional intelligence on students' study habits in blended learning environments: The mediating role of cognitive engagement during COVID-19. *Behavioral Sciences*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/BS12010014>
- Li, D. (2022). Required improvements from the students' perspective. *The Electronic Journal of E-Learning*, 20(1), 1–18. Retrieved from www.ejel.org
- Pavlidou, I., Dragicevic, N., & Tsui, E. (2021). A multi-dimensional hybrid learning environment for business education: A knowledge dynamics perspective. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13073889>
- Rao, G.V., & Vijayalakshmi, D. (2022). Preference for mode of learning for knowledge and skills by professional management students during the COVID-19 pandemic period. *Management and Labour Studies*, 47(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0258042X211020604>
- Robson, L., Gardner, B., & Dommert, E.J. (2022). The post-pandemic lecture: Views from academic staff across the UK. *Education Sciences*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12020123>
- Sarfraz, M., Khawaja, K.F., & Ivascu, L. (2022). Factors affecting business school students' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic: A moderated and mediated model. *International Journal of Management Education*, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2022.100630>
- Serafim-Silva, S., Spers, R.G., Vázquez-Suárez, L., & Ramírez, C.P. (2022). Evolution of blended learning and its prospects in management education. *International Journal of Professional Business Review*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2022.v7i1.291>