DIGITALLY DRIVING CONSUMER ENGAGMENT TO IMPROVE PEDAGOGICAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract

The transition to Web 3.0 technologies presents many undefined challenges for marketers and marketing educators. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this shift is the evolution from inter-personal communications to communications and commerce facilitated by digital technologies (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, and Bitner, 2000). That is, contemporary consumption and engagement is largely facilitated by a digital screen interface. It seems inconsistent with contemporary marketing practice to provide digitally-related content using traditional lecture-tutorial methods, even with the augmentation of a supporting website housing chat rooms, teaching materials and other resources offered by Learning Management Systems that evolved from the "old ways". The central proposition of this paper is that learning practices for digital marketing needs to be customised for digital natives using experiential and embedded learning techniques. A fundamental readjustment may be required in our educational business models to more fully utilise digital technology to provide our consumers with the theory and practice they will require to be able to critically evaluate and utilise technology that has yet to be developed.

Students as Consumers

Marketers and educators share a similar challenge in that their consumers are characterised by shrinking attention spans, an increased sense of ownership and entitlement, and an increasing number of distractions such as multi-tasking using multiple screens or devices (Kulesza, DeHondt, and Nezlek, 2011; Lederer, 2012). The days where educators could once "push" content via traditional methods only are obsolete and this is evidenced by the sea of digital devices that confronts educators during face to face class time. We must ask ourselves, then, how many of our consumers are actually paying full attention to our content delivery while they engage with their personal and multiple devices brought to class? As educators we must therefore be prepared and honest about the changing dynamics of face-to-face interaction in class time, and the nature of technology within. It is well known that digital media has become popular: Facebook has more than 850 million users (2013), LinkedIn has 220 million plus members (2013), Twitter reports over 500 million tweets per day (2013), and YouTube hosts1 billion unique users visit each month (2013). There are many more digital media consumers in China, Russia and Asia that use digital media beyond those already mentioned, which are specific to language, culture and local technology. We must therefore also ask ourselves the question: can digital technology be better harnessed to provide enhanced education models for teaching tertiary students?

Miller et al. (2003) found that traditional education delivery is redundant in a digital technology subject, since it inhibits students from fully grasping the theory, knowledge and skills underpinning it. Yet beyond digital technology subjects, online environments provide opportunities for better and more meaningful learning outcomes for tertiary students (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, and Meyer, 2010; Vaz and David, 2012). Laird and Kuh (2005, p.211) for instance suggest that

> …there appears to be a strong positive relationship between using technology for educational purposes and involvement in effective educational practices such as active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction.

Thus there is general agreement of academics and professionals that interactive learning models in marketing are critical to effective pedagogical outcomes (Borodzicz, 2004). For the current generation of university students, a majority adopt technological skills early on in life and so are therefore well prepared for such advances in technology-based education models (McHaney, 2011; Guy, 2012). Ulbrich, Jahnke and Mårtensson (2010, p.ii) for example argue that:

> ...members of the net generation use the web differently, they network differently, and they learn differently... [and are] used to networking; its members work collaboratively, they execute several tasks simultaneously, and they use the web to acquire knowledge.

Since students are increasingly connected to a diverse range of digital technologies, it stands to reason that educators should behave like marketers in the adoption and use of digital channels in order to achieve an appropriate share of our consumers' screen-time and engagement.

Whilst predominantly used for personal reasons, social media is fundamental to the interactions of Gen X, Y, and Z (Browning, Gerlich and Westermann, 2011), and, , the potential benefits of using digital technology for academic purposes is widely recognised (see for example Hughes, 2009; Chen and Bryer, 2012). A gap still remains however between social media and education; that is, it is rarely embraced for educational or learning purposes (Selwyn, 2011). In the 2010 EDUCAUSE study more than 90% of university students reported the use social networking services, yet less than 30% of respondents reported using social networks as part of their formal university education (Smith and Borreson, 2010). The lack of digital engagement between students and academe is due to academics not incorporating the technology into their content delivery system: for instance, 80% of US academics report they do not use social media technologies in educational delivery (FSSE, 2010). Chen and Bryer (2012) found for instance that while many academics used social media personally, time constraints, workloads, privacy issues and cyber bullying were cited as reasons for not using these channels in academic engagement and delivery of content in education.

There is clearly an element of resistance to technological change in education models; however educators must bear in mind that teaching practices should be driven by educational objectives rather than technological desires (Freeman and Capper 1999; Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005). Thus, if the conceptual basis of subjects can be better understood using a multimedia approach, then it stands to reason that digital media become integrated to the core element of subject design. In other words, if marketing educators practice what they preach, it follows that digital platforms should be widely used to enable students to transition into engaged prosumers of theoretical and applied content. Digitally-based learning tools such as a specifically designed online simulation or a game can lead to a shift in students more actively participating in the construction of knowledge and learning (Sweeney and Ingram 2001; Bonk and Kim, 2006).

Appropriate online learning can enhance student learning, better prepare students to make effective use of technology in their post-education workplace and enable educators to be more productive (Chong 1997; Freeman and Capper 1999; Miller et al., 2003; Vaz and David, 2012). As interactivity is a teaching tool commonly thought to improve learning outcomes (cf. Hamer 2000; Jonassen 2000; Guy, 2012), this paper argues that the pedagogy of applying digital and social media technology will provide students with interactive technology-based experiential learning opportunities. This means moving past the objective of building students' "technocompetency" skills (e.g. Smart, Tomkovick, Jones and Menon, 1999) and into a world of student digital interaction that allows lesson and theory to be practiced. This paper reflects on the use of social media to pioneer a superior and engaged learning experience for tertiary students, whilst also considering the various learning styles that are required by the students (Conolea, et al., 2008).

The Opportunity for Experiential Learning

Feinstein et al (2002) discuss experiential learning as a participatory method of learning. It utilises a variety of mental capabilities when a learner participates in an active and immersive learning environment. Experiential learning outcomes can be measured to demonstrate an increased capacity to evoke higher order cognitive abilities in areas such as problem solving and judgement (Feinstein 2001). Similarly, Miller et al (2003) and Vaz and David (2012) identify meta-processes in experiential learning that require the learner to apply knowledge and principles to new situations.

Prensky (2003) argues for a better teaching model than that used to argue for the mass lecture. The author cites data to claim a tutored student's achievement is better than 98% of classroom students; that the average time between questions for individuals in a classroom is 10 hours and interaction drops to near zero. In making use of a moderated digital environment, we are approaching the one-on-one tutorial model with help (moderation) instantly available; involving a high level and frequency of interaction; requiring decisions to be made and seeing the consequences; allowing for reflection on actions; and providing time for learners to compose their thoughts and contribute in a considered manner. Other advantages identified by Ip and Linser (2001) and Junco, Heibergert and Loken (2011) are that weaker students who participate tend to understand the material better than weaker students who do not. Furthermore, the moderator/teacher can intervene if necessary to pose specific questions that clarify whether a learner understands the material. BrckaLorenz et al.'s 2013 research suggests that:

> ...technology is a significant part of students' day-to-day experiences and is significantly related to a number of effective educational practices and student outcomes...[the] greater use of technology to communicate increases the quality of the relationships students have with faculty, staff, and peers.

For example, Freeman and Capper (1998, p.96) found:

> Students came to understand the complex pressures at work on regulators and market participants. They had to deal with pressures of time and public reaction as well as learning to represent complex organisations in unfamiliar scenarios. They achieved a deeper understanding of their own views and those of others, as well as the limitations of the two main paradigms in practical contexts.

Thus the argument that traditional teaching models can be extended in marketing education reflects well on teaching and outcomes for students, particularly in terms of building their in-depth understanding of real-world situations.

While traditional role-plays have been used extensively in education (Chesler and Fox 1966), they have been accused of suffering from a lack of reality in areas such as risk consequences (e.g. financial transactions) and relationships (e.g. vendors, customers) (Daly 2001). According to Freeman and Capper (1999), the digital environment may present improvements such as anonymity and asynchronicity (that allows students time to reflect on their role in a time that suits them). For a marketing course, digital technology presents underexplored opportunities through alternative learning models such as gamification (digital games in which students are required to solve problems) that can provide students with a unique experiential learning opportunity – actually going out into an electronic environment to dynamically interact to respond, negotiate, lobby, and manage products and organisational marketing strategies. For instance, the key skills Natesan and Smith (1998) identify for marketing communications, such as mass communications, search and retrieval, problem solving and promotion can be built into interactive learning forums such as games. Further, as Browning, Gerlich, and Westermann's

(2011) research reveals, there is evidence of strong favourable perceptions of social media in general and a high degree of readiness to embrace social media portals as a way to deliver course content. There is for example a simulation teaching tool developed using both the online (Blackboard) and social (Facebook and Twitter) media. The trend towards increasing use of games and simulations for teaching has important implications for understanding how informal and formal learning can support and reinforce one another in order to accelerate learning, support higher-order cognitive development and strengthen motivation in skills-based learning (de Freitas, 2004; de Freitas & Levene, 2004; Delanghe, 2001; Klabbers, 2003; Shawn Green & Bavelier, 2003).

Australian Tertiary Student Online Engagement

Each "learning" market has its own characteristics of digital use and engagement. For example, on average 99% of Australians aged between 20 and 29 years use Facebook 33 times per week, for 18 minutes per visit, to contact their 366 Facebook friends (but only ever see 41% of their "friends" during a year) (Sensis, 2013). A similar age demographic characterises that found in Australian tertiary institutions, which means that many Australian tertiary students engage on Facebook for 594 minutes (or almost 10 hours) each week. This does not include time spent on Twitter, Google, Instagram or the many other digital products available for students. Further, the 20 to 29-year-old demographic is extremely mobile when accessing digital content. with 86% reporting the use of smart phones, 69% using laptop computers, and 29% using tablets (compared with 36% using text top computers) (Sensis, 2013).

To learn more about Australian marketing students' digital usage and to provide students an opportunity to reflect on the potential impact of digital media may have on marketing and consumption, students were asked to keep a digital diary as part of their assessment in an undergraduate digital marketing class. In general, the students' use of digital media was omnipresent across time, place and devices, making it extremely difficult for many students to keep accurate diaries.

Australian Tertiary Student Digital Native Profile

Forty-seven undergraduate students from a class of 120 managed to summarise their digital diary into a form where it could be empirically analysed. The students' average total weekly social media engagement was 60.06 hours per week. The time allocated to "personal" Facebook use accounts for 10.06 hours and another 4.4 hours each week was spent "txting". These findings are similar to data presented in the national 2013 Australian study by Sensis. Interestingly, over 25% of the students' overall time on social media (15.67 hours per week) was spent on University related reading posting, real time discussions, and other forms of engagement with fellow students. While the data is self-reported, it illustrates how students now participate in new communities and the time allocations in terms of student engagement and learning. The issue confronting academics is how to best engage these students as digital consumption is a necessity in today's teaching environment in Australia.

Yet academics and educators must also be aware that there will be challenges to integrating such technological approaches to tertiary education models. An American study for example identifies how disparity is evident between students in terms of access to, experience of, and skills in using technology. Such disparities reflect age, ethnic and gender imbalances, and as such, a "digital divide" between users and non-users of technology is rapidly increasing (BrckaLorenz, Haeger, Nailos and Rabourn, 2013). Thus whilst it is possible to recognise the possibilities for broadening the opportunities for teaching and learning through innovative techniques, educators must also consider the potential challenges in crossing the digital divide so that all students can benefit. Nonetheless, a majority of participants in the above study

indicated they prefer the new technology-enhanced teaching spaces, and that the difficulties of implementing them are outweighed by the gains of 'relationship-building between faculty and students participating in this learning curve together and increased student interest and creativity' (p. 6, citing Morrone et al., 2012).

Engaging and Educating Digital Natives

Drawing from this knowledge of student use in the digital environment and the principles of online learning identified by Miller et al. (2003), a specially designed interactive learning model was developed to prepare marketing communication students to manage an organisational "issue or crisis" and develop and implement strategies to manage the adverse series of events they were confronted with. The simulation allows students to understand the time and resource pressures and the consequences of their decisions; in short, the simulation or game seeks to develop skills for the real world crisis management within a supportive learning environment. Consistent with Daly's (2001) description of the instructor or lecturer in his interactive teaching method, the role of the instructor in a simulation is one of facilitator characterized by little intervention.

Interactive learning models in communication management are critical to ensuring that tertiary students have effective pedagogical outcomes (Borodzicz, 2004). The digital and social media environment provides an opportunity to use these media to deliver and produce better and more meaningful learning outcomes for tertiary students. The challenge of teaching contemporary marketing communication is then ensuring students understand how these new digital media empower individuals to voice their opinions in real-time to a global audience, causing organisations to face a new and complex communications environment. Howell and Bridges (2009)The author's experience and research finds communication graduates use the WWW and online and social media as key tools in their roles as communication practitioners. Academics and professionals agree that it is 'impossible to practice effective communication today without using the Internet' (Newsom and Turk, 2010, p. 62); however, it is also important that student needs are supported though the incorporation of technologies such as the university Blackboard interface, social media engagement, email messaging, intense small group workshops, seminars and traditional lectures appealing to the various learning styles (Conolea, et al, 2008).

Serini (2002) suggests using a professional model in the classroom to allow for an in-depth understanding the complexity of issues and crisis management. Supported by a University E-learning Initiative Grant, an online simulation was developed in line with this model. It incorporates nine simulation scenarios for all crisis typologies based on Coombs (2007) crises types. Each simulation is designed for small student teams working both F2F, online and with social media, students are asked to devise effect business strategies to manage the events and devise communication tactics to support the strategy. The events unfold as a series of postings on the University's Blackboard site, and as updates on Facebook and Twitter. The design of the simulation and associated assessment ensures the seamless incorporation of social media into curriculum (Lester and Perini, 2010).

The Twitter handle and Facebook Avatar ("Cris Comms") is an example of digital technology providing additional support to students as well as useful information, links to interesting and relevant publications, blogs and websites. The Facebook-teaching Avatar produced impressive engagement and outstanding results. The Avatar obtains 100% engagement as all the students "friend" Cris and join the semester's private group on Facebook. On average, 75% of the students in these units also follow the Twitter handle and directly tweet about the simulation reflecting on their actions and responses as well as the course materials and topics covered in the weekly lectures. "Cris" chats online about issues raised in class; posts status reports on current issues in the media as well as the topics covered in the readings. The Facebook Avatar

engages students in discussions about the complex concepts and theories that were explored in the lectures and readings. “Cris” also posts reflections so students gain further insight into their simulation, theoretical frameworks and marketing communication. At times, students forget they are chatting to a lecturer or become immersed in the assessment; they ask questions such as ‘Hey Cris, what’s a prodrom again?’ (Facebook, 2012a), they probe topics ‘the Mitroff theory, can I relate to my critique like this...’ (Facebook, 2012b) and enjoy the social media platform far more than in the formal Blackboard site. ‘Love Twitter & FB, thanx 4 this #criscomms’ (SFU, 2013). Although students engage in range of social media channels, they are still required to provide screen grabs of all postings and paste these into the closed Blackboard group journals. The academic acts as moderator for these posts and monitors and assists groups struggling is topics in real time thus enhancing their understanding and learning. This model therefore aims to go beyond the traditional confines of classroom lectures and into real-world contexts constituted by social interaction.

‘Cris thanks so much I would have got that so wrong without you’ (Facebook, 2013). While the students are assessed on their individual postings and engagement as well as the group working together as a team, they are also required to reflect on their actions and responses. On completion of the simulation, the students come back to the class room analysing their progress and present their actions and responses to the entire class. The online engagement is extremely effective for personal and group learning with on average 500 postings per simulation on Blackboard (and more than 3000 on Facebook). The results of from the formal Student Feedback on Unit has been that students assert that the online social media support is vital in their learning; ‘Loved Cris Comms, you helped me understand stuff, while doing the simulation in real time’ (SFU, 2012b). Students reflect the simulation is ‘unique and engaging way to apply course materials” (SFU, 2011a) and finally “so loved coming back to class to tell the others what we did and why, I learnt from other presentations as well as my own’ (SFU, 2010a). Online networks such as Facebook and Twitter supported by Blackboard have enabled to students to become more active participants in the construction of knowledge and learning.

Conclusion

So rather than being told “how” to manage and respond to a business crisis from a distance, students are immersed into the polarised dynamics of traditional response and develop action plans rather than following prescriptive check lists. The impact of these students engaging through the online simulation augmented by social media engagement is that they are continually returning to real world outcomes for clarification, which aligns with the principles of critical theory for teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2005). The opportunities for student learning to be augmented is now supported by a host of media, such as Hootsuite, simultaneous Skype and F2F lectures, iBooks, real time Facebook and Snapchat discussions during lectures, Twitter updates, Pinterest discussion boards and online teaching simulations to enhance their learning experience.

In reality, communication management is a dynamic and challenging task: it is very difficult to understand and experience the complexities of business response by only reading about past triumphs and failures. The challenge is how to enable students to learn and experience these complexities in a sound, pedagogically-designed teaching program, whilst also paying respect to the digital divides and embedded social disparities that impact on technology use. Academic, industry and graduate feedback indicates that students must learn to prepare, manage and respond to crises in time pressure situations. Formal and informal student feedback, regarding learning resources and flexibility of learning and assessment, indicates that students want a better understanding of how a crisis evolves and more current cases to review. Through the development of innovative and effective curricula and resources to provide this experience, the pedagogical outcomes have proven outstanding. The unique combination of social and digital

media, blending teaching delivery, contemporary teaching resources and innovative simulations provide the key to such educational success.

Social media allows academics to develop interactive and engaging content and assessment for students and assist in the creation of learning communities. Digital media such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest allow educators and our consumers to share and comment on information, data and lecture materials, interact in real time with both peers and educators, and generate learning materials. The engaging and interactive nature enabled by digital media also allows for academics to convert students into prosumers of knowledge throughout the course of the semester, and facilitate an active and ongoing peer network within their area of study, that can be taken beyond their graduate years and into professional contexts.

Digital technology is here: it will only become more pervasive. The onus is therefore on educators and students to maximise the innovation and learning opportunities provided by digital media. However, it must also be recognised that digital technology is dynamic and it requires considerable investment (especially time) to stay abreast of these fast moving trends. University administrators must provide more resources and redefine workload models to encourage and enable educators to harness digital technology for constructed pedagogical outcomes that prepare students for the real world challenges they will face.

To foster and develop the desired attributes in university graduates of today and the future, innovative and effective pedagogies need to be employed. New technologies to deliver curricular in marketing communication that reflect such pedagogies produce teaching outcomes of great significance and priority for contemporary educational practices. The results derived illustrate effective design and implementation of blended learning and simulation pedagogies develop students' deep understandings of communication practice.

References Available upon Request