

REWRITING MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS EDUCATION USING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Armed with a substantial grant from The Enterprise Challenge, the Prime Minister's Office of Singapore in 2000 to innovate higher education for the knowledge based economy, the authors piloted the implementation of Authentic Problem-Based Learning (APBL) in the Marketing Communications program at Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore in January to October 2001.

The paper describes the rationale for the adoption of APBL as the preferred education philosophy to produce work-ready and change-ready graduates in Marketing Communications. It shows the nuts and bolts of PBL by describing the why, what, where, who, how and so what.

Instead of adopting APBL as an add-on to the traditional curriculum, the authors aligned the education sub-systems namely: curriculum design, delivery and assessment in PBL. Adopting an integrated approach, the first step was to formulate the desired outcomes for their graduates.

With this end in mind, the authors deconstructed the traditional curriculum; adopted small group tutorial process and involved the industry in problem design and assessment of their students' work.

Along the APBL journey, they measured responses from students, staffs and industry partners to seek gaps for continuous improvement. Reflecting on their piloting work, the authors conclude with observations that they made in their APBL experiences.

KEYWORDS

Problem-Based Learning, Outcome-Based Education, Marketing Communications, Curriculum Design, Delivery, Assessment, Client-Based Projects, Small Group Tutorial.

THE WHY - IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Our government's call for our nation's people to build a New Singapore has grown in intensity due to the complexity of the economic and political landscape. Singapore can only count on the skills and resourcefulness of her people. It is human capital that needs to be enterprising, innovative and worldly. A new breed of intellectual capital is needed. The cornerstone for moulding the intellectual capital lies in the quality of education that is needed to produce a quality work force.

The new environment landscape presents new challenges and opportunities. Formulating strategies to ensure that our nation remains continually competitive, effective and relevant in the future are important. In today's knowledge-based economy, as educators, we need to look into the future to see what our students will need, and shape our current systems and methods to assist them to achieve that goal.

The polytechnic education assumes a unique role in the Singapore's education system. It differs from a university education by preparing graduates for their professional careers and vocational practice. Hence, it is more oriented towards industry and practical applications. Polytechnic is not meant to be a "mini-university" by duplicating the same learning activities and environment as the university.

The APBL piloting work was conducted in the Marketing Communications program, a final year option in the Diploma in Marketing at Temasek Polytechnic. Our analysis of the marketing communications education globally reveals that most curriculum is written based on subjects and textbooks. It is not based on real work problems. Most accreditation process emphasizes on academic rigor and less vocational training. There is a lack of practical relevance. Students learn and organize knowledge based on subjects, not work problems. Subject-based curriculum promotes silo thinking and lacks integration. But real work problems are multi-dimensional and cut across many subjects. Students need to learn how to integrate these subjects.

Subject-based curriculum depends heavily on textbooks. Textbooks become dated very quickly and fail to address contemporary issues. In short, the curriculum is static. These books may be written by authors/academics who lack current work experience. There is a lack of consultation with marketing professionals. Employers also confirmed that they are not willing to hire graduates who are theorists.

We proposed an education approach that can reflect the challenges and contemporary issues of the workplace with a holistic approach to marketing communications rather than a subject-delineated approach. We involved the industry as partners in education and aligned a learning platform to the workplace to help our graduates to be work-ready and change-ready.

THE WHAT, WHO, WHEN & HOW - WORKPLACE AS THE BEST DOMAIN FOR LEARNING

Because polytechnic education is practised-based, we looked to the industry for high impact problems that our students should be able to solve as the starting point to learn. We need to prepare our graduates for whatever lies beyond school because their careers will span across various economic cycles and structural changes.

Outcome-Based Education

Outcome-based education approach means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an education system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences (Spady, 1994). The outcomes refer to the competencies or skills that are essentially required for all the students to demonstrate. Table 1 shows the exit outcomes that students of Diploma in Marketing must demonstrate when they graduate.

The outcome-based approach allows the marketing communications discipline to fit into the wider context of business and requires our graduates to add value to their employers by creating relevant solutions. Employers need not spend additional time and resources to train our graduates since they are real work ready and able to solve high impact marketing problems.

Table 1
Exit Outcomes

Exit Outcomes	Descriptions
Functional	<p>Acquisition of an integrated marketing knowledge that is gathered from solving marketing problems that a marketing graduate is likely to encounter in the workplace.</p> <p>The graduate should be competent in performing the typical marketing problems found in the workplace.</p>
Transactional	<p>The approach adopted by the graduate to perform his tasks. The graduate should be competent to conduct an efficient and effective problem solving process.</p> <p>The graduate should be competent to engage in group brainstorming, participates in active discussion, learns from peers, gives and accepts constructive feedback about self and peer.</p>
Professional	<p>The personal skills and qualities that are desired and necessary of a professional marketer and his self-development.</p> <p>The graduate should be able to determine what /she needs to learn in an efficient and effective manner that becomes habitual.</p>

	The graduate should be professional and displays high standard of conduct and practices of the discipline.
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The outcome-based curriculum was designed as follows:

- Worked with employers to formulate a list of exit outcomes that our graduates must be able to perform so that they can hit the ground running (Table 1).
- Worked with employers to identify a list of common yet high impact marketing communications problems that our graduates must be able to solve.
- In order to develop life-long skills among our students, the content-based curriculum was reduced. The subject leaders were asked to list down the “non-negotiables” and “must-haves” of their subjects. We trust that our graduates should be able to pick up the “nice-to-have” aspects of their subjects on their own.
- Deconstruction of the traditional subjects that serve as artificial boundaries.
- Placed all core learning objectives of all these traditional subjects together and sorted them by common themes. This allowed duplications and overlapping learning objectives to be grouped together to reflect contemporary and integrated issues in marketing.
- Clustered new areas of learning into themes (Table 2).
- Sought real clients and real work challenges for students to work on. Lecturers work with clients to craft marketing communications problems for students to solve. The curriculum is problem-based not subject-based. Problem drives learning instead of subjects (Table 2).
- Students were group into teams of 5-6 and worked as an advertising agency to serve these clients.
- The classroom was converted to a laboratory with desktop publishing tools and office equipment for them to do their agency work.
- Lecturers changed their roles from content providers to coaching their students to attain the desired outcomes that employers seek.
- Education is now student-centered. Students are active learners and take charge of their own learning journeys. They develop skills beyond mere acquisitions of content. They develop the necessary life-long skills to sustain their self-renewal in the new economic landscape – both in their personal lives and careers.
- Assessment goes beyond testing and examining subject and content.

Table 2
Marketing Communications (January to October 2001)

Year / Semester	Theme	Subjects	Client-projects
3 / 2 (Jan 01 to May 01)	Creating Brand Equity	Public Relations Direct Marketing & Sales Promotion Integrated Marketing Communications Project	Bon Concept Business Week Restaurant Frito Lay Orange Julius Seagate

			Starhub
3 / 1 (July 01- Oct 01)	Growing MarCom Business	Practice of Entrepreneurship Advertising Management Strategic & Creative Visual Communications	Aibi Continuing Education Centre, Temasek Polytechnic Federal Express NOP Investments Poh Heng Jewelry Metro

Development of Lifelong Skills

Adopting APBL (Barrows, 2000) as the education philosophy, our students worked on authentic problems that they are likely to encounter after graduation. Problems were presented in the same format as those in the real world. It permitted free inquiry by students and allowed them to engage their prior knowledge. Problems were multi-disciplinary and allowed students to integrate contents from different disciplines.

Because of free inquiry posed by the problems, our students practised problem-solving skills guided by lecturers as coaches who facilitated the learning process as required in the same group APBL tutorial. They developed self-directed learning skills. They recognized when/where they needed more information and learnt how to acquire them on a just-in-time basis.

Students learnt to apply new knowledge to the problem. They critiqued and revised their prior reasoning, decision and discussion based on new findings. After solving the problem, they reviewed what they have learnt, discussed its potential application to future problems and made generalisations. The structure of knowledge for future use/ contexts was learnt based on problems encountered and would be stored in the same manner for easy recall and application.

Students worked on problems together in a small group and with a lecturer. They developed team skills. The sequence of behaviors required of the students in the classroom parallels those in the real world. They remained motivated to learn throughout the project.

Assessment

Because assessment drives learning, we need to align our assessment plan to our desired exit outcomes.

Table 3: Authentic PBL Assessment Components

Components	Weightage (%)
Group Written Project	40
Group Oral Presentation	10
Individual Integrated Test	15
Individual Self/Peer Assessment	10
Individual Tutor's Assessment	10

Evaluation

Key Findings Of PBL As A Learning Platform (Landscape Survey)

A landscape survey was conducted on 108 students at the end of the semester to track their perception of APBL as a better learning platform and their overall satisfaction level.

90% of the respondents were satisfied with their PBL learning.

91% agreed that the PBL program focused on real-time, real client/industry problems.

81% agreed that PBL enabled them to apply their learning experiences to the challenges and demands of the working world.

76% agreed that they participated actively for their PBL sessions.

Key Findings Of PBL Problem-Fit And Exit Outcomes (Theme Survey)

Two theme surveys were conducted at the end of semester to determine the learning experiences of the students in theme-based small group PBL tutorial.

Table 4
Key Findings from Theme Survey

Exit Outcomes	Creating Brand Equity	Growing Marcom Business
Integrated knowledge	94%	92%
Reasoning skills	97%	83%
Self-directed learning skills	93%	85%
Team skills	89%	86%

Table 5
Key Findings from Theme Surveys (Qualitative Results)

What Students Liked About PBL	What Students Do Not Like About PBL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real clients and industry/Hands-on • Integration of subjects • Interesting • Challenging and creative • Flexibility and independent learning • Can learn and recall better • Teamwork and supportive tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of instructions and guidance • Tedious / stress • Limited resources • Ambiguity / uncertainty • Time management / tight schedule / time consuming • Free riders among members

Key Findings Of Focus Group Study On PBL

A focus group study was conducted in November 2001. There were 8 participants. The aim was to seek qualitative comments to support the quantitative tools outlined above.

- “Make sure that I covered all learning issues because there is no lectures. Make sure that I facilitated well and everyone was engaged in discussion.”
- “PBL reduced our dependency and increased our self-directedness.”
- “We questioned a lot and justified our answers, rather than said whether we were right or wrong.”
- “We did a lot of self-learning and clarifying with tutors on the exactness of what we had learn.”

Some Feedback From The Clients/Employers/External Assessors On Students’ Oral Presentation And Written Report

- “Impressive, logical and well presented. We are very pleased and impressed with the efforts and work produced.” (Michael Lee, Frito Lay)
- “Overall, good creative and copy. It is interesting to note about the new developments in the handphone industry.” (Winnie Kang, Starhub)
- “Able to grasp the whole branding platform. Ideas, creatives and presentation are very impressive creatives and presentation. Good analysis and strategies.” (Albert Chan, Bon Concept Restaurant)
- “The ads are extremely creative. They will achieve the objectives of creating awareness.” (Pauline Kwek, Marketing Manager, Aibi)
- “Presentation is sleek and professional.” (Looi Boon Hwee, Creative Director, Nexus-Aasatu, agency for Poh Heng Jewelry)
- “Displayed good effort in integrating both above-the-line and below-the-line strategy to reach out to the target audience.” (Veronica Lee, A&P Manager, Metro Pte Ltd)
- “Group responded well during the discussion at question-and-answer session.” (Prof Charles Patti, External Examiner, Queensland University of Technology)

SO WHAT - REFLECTIONS

We realized that the degree of authenticity of the problem and the degree of subject integration have a positive correlation to the satisfaction level of our students. The more authentic the problem is, the better the subject integration, and the higher the satisfaction levels.

The clearer the lecturers are in understanding and accepting PBL, the more likely that he/she will follow closely to the essentials of the APBL process. Lecturers are trained in the past to teach today’s students for tomorrow’s worlds. Hence, he/she must be equipped with APBL tutoring skills.

The small group tutorial offers better development of students’ problem solving, self-directed learning and team skills. Within a small group, everyone has to play his/her role well.

Seeking buying-in and support from stakeholders are important for the change to succeed. Management, administrators, staffs, students, employers and higher education institutions must support the transformation. We need to review infrastructure to support APBL. Key issues include re-skilling and re-training existing faculty to develop cross-functional expertise and new teaching approach and creating a new resource appraisal that rewards and encourages active participation in the new teaching and learning effort. Finally, aligning the new program objectives to the mission and vision of the school and the institutions.

CONCLUSION

Our students reached greater heights with APBL. They attained outstanding performance in international competition such as the International Advertising Association Inter Ad annual advertising competition. This competition provides hands-on marketing communications experience for university students from around the world. It challenges competitors to work in teams to create an agency, solve a genuine problem for a real-world corporate client, gather market data and prepare marketing plan and all supporting creative materials. Global marketing communications professionals familiar with international advertising judged the competition.

For these students, they were really challenged and in finally producing a piece of product that is endorsed and 'inspected' by a panel of international marketing communications practitioners. The quality of their output was evident as they approached these international competitions with inquiring minds. One of two groups who submitted for the 2000 International Advertising Association Inter Ad Competition (Visa) won the third place in the Regional Category. In 2001, one of two groups who submitted for the 2001 Inter Ad Competition (Business Week) won the Regional Championship, and was nominated in four creative award categories.

APBL is a conscious and strategically planned education process that requires our students to go through the same activities during learning that are the same and valued in the real world (Barrows, 2000). The problems serve as the stimulus for learning and organization of new knowledge. This is different from the traditional way of building a curriculum, which usually starts from an educator's technical expertise and led by what have already been printed in textbooks or taught in schools. The past is static and not dynamic to the changing and demanding information world today. The traditional education approach is inward-looking and production-oriented. It fails to address the forces from outside. Yet, these outside forces are changing rapidly, thus widening the gap.

Our students are entering into a world of the information landscape where change is constant. The need to be entrepreneurial, innovative and global is pressing. As educators, we must set the pace, embrace these changes and produce a generation of students that are flexible, adaptable, critical and creative in thinking and able to solve any problems that change may bring.

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