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LEVELS OF FLIPPING THE CLASS ROOM: STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of mean exam scores of three groups of African-American Undergraduate business students to determine the effects of different levels of flipping the classroom. For the highest level of flipping, the results showed positive and significant effects of flipping compared to the control group. However, a second moderately flipped group did not have a significantly greater mean exam score compared to the control group. Thus consideration of flipping a threshold may be needed in some instances to cause the flipping effect.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is a study that examines changes in the test performance of a sample of African-American college students using the recent pedagogical model of “flipping the class room”. Jim Bergman and Aaron Sams (2012), in their recent book, describe principles of how having students actively participating in classroom activities and exercises, instead of passively listening to a lecture, creates more student interest, engagement and learning. Bergman and Sams argue that student interest is driven by immediate feedback, a key benefit of the flipping concept. In their particular flipping approach, they encouraged students to use Google Drive because of the software’s collaborative technology enabling access group and student- instructor collaboration regarding various research and creative activities to improve their academic performance. Other researchers have also reported studies on how effectively flipping technology has been in their college class rooms. For example, Lage, Platt and Tregelia, (2000) conducted a study in which economics was taught using a variety of teaching styles. They found that the variety of styles increase the student performance in the economics classes. They concluded that students learn in different ways or have different learning styles and that the teacher must present different teaching styles to accommodate the variety of student learning styles. Reichmann and Grasha (1974) designed a questionnaire in which they determined that students learn in one of three different ways, including a) being a dependent learner, b) a collaborative learner or c) independent learner. They concluded that the effectiveness of the teaching style was dependent upon the learning

style of the student, and the style-match with the teacher. They concluded that the teacher should vary their style, especially using styles other than the traditional lecture format. Reichman and Grasha used a variety of learning aids including video-lectures, exercises, discussion, problem assignments, power points, bulletin boards, and individual meetings with the economics students in their study. Dwortzan, (2012) also flipped the classroom for his engineering students in a course involving computational fluid dynamics at Boston University. Students watched videos of lectures online which was done outside of class time for collaborative student problem-solving. These meetings had the effect of helping students better understand the course core concepts. He found that this resulted in self-paced learning, which was a more effective way for his students to learn the concepts. Mark Gerstein (2012) reported that his various classroom flipping techniques were effective in increasing the understanding of basic math techniques in his classes. At Harvard, Crouch and Mazur (2000), reported gains in student performance over several years in math and engineering classes, and concluded that the flipping approach greatly improved performance over traditional methods of teaching. Deslaurier et. al. (2011) found significant learning gains in his physical science classes. Novak (1999) found that in having students do practice quizzes on-line before class, his students were able to benefit from “just-in-time” teaching, because their class was flipped. Flipping the class allowed students to use the collaborative technology to discover their weak knowledge areas before class, and then make adjustments just in time for the on-line quizzes. He reported that grades were much better with flipping and helped to improve the “just-in-time” performances on the quizzes. Carl Wieman et.al. (2011) reported significant learning gains in reading assignments and quiz scores by his physics students when they experienced the class room flip in the second semester, after being in the traditional mode the first semester. They reported that the scores from multiple choice questions increased for the experimental groups an average of 41% more than the control groups. In fact, Wieman refers to this increase as “dramatic” as the average increase was 2.5 standard deviations. Wieman, a Nobel Prize Winner in Physics, says, “The human brain accepts new concepts largely through constant recall, while interacting socially, so we must de-emphasize lecture in teaching and emphasize active problem-solving.” Richard Hake (1998) also found large increases using “integrative engagement” methods, creating gains of almost 2 standard deviations in student performance. Although the articles reviewed here is not exhaustive, a significant number of empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the flipping method with certain samples of college students compared to the traditional lecture. There seems to be significant agreement among important academic researchers as Carl Wieman and policy makers such as The President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, who concluded in a recent report that “flipping the classroom, active learning and other dynamic teaching methods are essential to produce good students. The challenge here is to choose appropriate classroom activities in which students are led to discover the important concepts, and explain them to each other”

At this point in the literature, researchers are exploring the relationships between a variety of techniques that can be classified as active and dynamic, especially for independent learning, in addition to effective student demonstration of basic concepts learned. Cynthia J. Brame, (2012) in an article reported in the *Journal Of Higher Education*, while defining Flipping the Classroom, said “students first get exposure to new material independently, usually done through reading or lecture videos. But then they use the class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge, perhaps through problem-solving, discussion or debates”. The source of new material outside the classroom varies as does the way the material is assimilated. Brame indicates that students can select which sources such as video lectures, read textbook or other means, would be best for them as an individual, since people learn best in different ways. She asked this question in the article:” Why lecture when students can do for themselves “? At Vanderbilt, Brame reports of using video lectures prior to class, so students can use as much active listening to the video before class as they choose to. They may view the resource material for the purpose of initial learning the material, or for review before class. Video lectures are taken from YouTube, Khan Academy, MIT’s Open Course, Coursera, or the textbook, among other sources. Charles Prober and Chip Heath (2012) of the Stanford Medical School used short on-line faculty presentations. Lage, Platt and Tegalía (2000) has required readings, lecture videos, printable power points, voice-over presentations and worksheets; Mazur and Crouch (2001) used quizzes and clickers requiring responses to questions before class. Novac (1999) required before-class writing assignments and problems assignments. Variety in the way information has been presented is a key part of the flipping model.

Assuming the attainment of the basic concepts and theories are attained, before class by the student, assimilation in class is enabled. The types of demonstrations of in-class learning are as varied as the ways of providing out-of-classroom learning. The in-class assimilation techniques often depend on the nature of the task being done, which can differ greatly from physical jobs to strategic, etc. A list of such ways to demonstrate this knowledge reported in the literature include: writing assignments, multiple choice questions, case discussions, role playing, debates, quizzes, effort, completion of assignment, processing feedback, etc. This assimilation period is the time when the teachers get to interact with students while they were learning and processing feedback. Providing active dynamic teaching and immediate feedback and encouragement helps to promote effective learning.

Brame (2011), though noting that though most studies found the “flipping effect” in science, math, engineering and economics classes, argued that nonetheless, the flipping approach has “broad applicability” to history and other social science subjects. The present paper is an example of Brame’s idea as it will venture outside the science areas to business management. It will also venture into what may also be different in terms of

having all African-American Students. Few, if any, of the studies have been done with a population of African-American college students in a Historically Black University.

Specifically, this paper does report of an experience with flipping the classroom in business courses. The model for the study follows those already reported on earlier in this paper. There are, however, some design variations in the model that are different in terms of the source and range of resources and aids available to students in the experimental groups. The particular resources helped students in the treatment groups to understand the concepts and theories of the course outside the classroom. These before-class resources go beyond the video of the lecture, to include an on-line lab of content designed both by the professor and the textbook publisher. Among the resources available in the lab were power-point presentations, videos of lectures, e-textbooks, flash cards, quizzes, summaries, cases and exercises. These aids were all available for students' access and use to help students prepare on their schedule. The aids were specifically designed to help the student understand class subject matter before coming to class.

The research models thus far in the flipping literature show a wide variation in types and number of activities that are done in class to enhance student learning and performance. Using a wide variation is appropriate because the theory suggests that individuals learn in different ways, thus the greater the variety in stimulating classroom activities, more students will be reached by the process. That is, the "light bulbs" of a greater number of students will come on because of a particular activity or activities that triggered the switch. Presumably, for some students the flipping activities may serve only to add to, or create more intense illumination. In any case, the theory would predict greater student learning and performance.

This paper questions whether there is a threshold of flipping activity beyond which a benefit is realized. Accordingly, this paper reports the results of testing the effects with three different levels of flipping activity.

METHOD

The purpose of the study is to test the proposition that the flipping model would be an effective way to increase the performance of African-American students on final exams. Because the flipping process involves one-on-one coaching, interaction, monitoring, and helpful assistance, it is expected to increase the interest and performance of these students. Based on the results of previous researchers, it is expected that students whose classes are flipped most (high flipping level) will perform better on the final test compared to students who experience moderate or low level (i.e., no) flipping. It is also expected that some flipping is better than none, thus, a moderate level of flipping would result in students performing higher on the final exam than students who do not

experience flipping. Finally, it is expected that the effect will be greater with females who may be somewhat more prepared for active involvement than males.

The students in this study included undergraduate seniors enrolled in one of three business policy classes. The control class was not flipped, but taught with the traditional lecture method during the spring semester, 2012. Two of the classes were flipped, which took place over the course of two semesters (spring semesters, 2013 and 2014). These students whose classes were flipped comprised the 2 experimental groups. The mean exam scores of these flipped classes were compared with the mean exam scores of other students whose class was not flipped. The latter group of students constituted the control group, because their classes were not flipped.

Student participants in the study all took the same departmental final exam, although in different Spring semesters of 2012-2014. These tests were all based on the same textbook chapters, used the same number of questions, with minor variation of randomly selected questions from the same test bank, provided by the textbook publisher. Each test contained multiple choice questions drawn from a test bank population of over 500 questions. There was often considerable overlap in terms of drawing the same or very similar questions each time for the tests.

In addition, it should be noted that all classes had cases and assigned homework. But these assignments were done outside of class and there was minimal discussion about them. However, the control group's class time was totally taken up with lectures as the primary method for teaching the class. It was expected that students would stop by the office during office hours if they wanted to talk about anything. However, most students were working, or had other priorities, so stopping by the office rarely happened. Very minimal time was given for interaction with the 39 control class students in 2012. These students came and sat for 1 hour 20 minutes, listened to the lecture, took notes, or not, and left the class. Questions from students were very infrequently asked. No discussion about the homework took place, as it was turned in, graded and returned to the student without discussion. There was usually some discussion about the exam grade from a few individuals. The experimental groups had a different experience.

The experimental groups were students enrolled in business policy during the spring semesters of 2013 and 2014, respectively. There were 39 students each group. The 2013 experimental group received considerably less flipping as this was the first semester using the approach so it was only partly flipped. The 2013 group had approximately 60 percent having lectures. Although expected to complete readings before class, most students seldom did. Most students were often first exposed to chapter material in class. The on-line lab was optional and few students registered for the lab. But there was at least some class time in this group doing exercises and active engagement to assimilate the core concepts.

The 2014 class received a full semester of using the flipping process. They received only a few brief in-class lectures to clarify more difficult concepts, but typically, class time was spent doing exercises, applications, discussions, online research, role plays, group and individual assignments. During class, time was spent engaging in exercises that assimilated the basic content. The instructor would go around engaging the students, providing assistance, answering questions, clarifying, reviewing, encouraging, etc. Also the instructor would encourage them to engage each other discussing the assignments. Another benefit of flipping is that often students can teach each other more easily than the instructor of the class. The 2014 experimental group was specifically required to read the chapters before class and be prepared to use the chapter content to apply to the cases, exercises and applications during class time. However, in the 2013 class, this was not always reinforced. During the 2014 class, students were required to turn in answers to chapter questions as proof that they had answered the questions before class. Students were also required to also register for and use MYMANAGEMENT LAB, provided by the publisher to read and prepare for class. As the lab provided a variety of ways to study the chapter content, including summaries, videos of lectures, flash cards, power point slides, quizzes, etextbooks, applications, and exercises, students could choose the method that is best for them to do before class. Even the individual assignments often resulted in discussion among the class about the results or recommendations of individuals for that particular assignment. Both the experimental groups and the control group was administered the same final exam. It is these data from the final exams of these three classes of students (spring, 2012-2014) that are compared in this study.

The analysis of the data included calculating means, variances, a one-way anova, and a Tukey Post Hoc analysis. The SPSS software was used to calculate the statistical results.

Subjects

The participants were all undergraduate, second semester seniors, enrolled in the School of Business Administration who agreed to participate in this study. They represent varying majors within the School, including Management, Accounting, Marketing, Finance, Information systems, and Supply Chain Management, among other majors. Ninety-eight percent of the students were under age 24, and 100% were African-American. The total number of participants was 117, including students from all three classes. Table 1 shows a classification of the student participants by class, test group (control vs. experimental) and gender. It also shows that the control group class size was equal in number to the class size of the experimental groups. Approximately 22 to 30 percent more females were enrolled in the classes.

TABLE 1

Distribution of Subjects by Class, Sex and Test Group

Class/ Test Group	Females	Males	Total
2012-Control	23	16	39
2013-Experimental	22	17	39
2014-Experimental	21	18	39

RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to test the null hypotheses of no differences in the final exam mean scores of students of business policy in spring semesters of 2012-2014. It also tested whether the experimental groups have higher mean final test scores as a result of the flipping method used. Research on the flipping pedagogy with test scores have rarely been reported in studies of black college students. The subjects used in most of the reported flipping studies excluded non-white students. This paper purports to test the null hypotheses for this latter sample of students.

Hypothesis: No statistical difference exists between the mean final exam scores of students who took business policy in spring 2012-2014.

In order to test this hypothesis, the researcher used the final exam scores of students from three business policy classes. This included 117 total students, with an equal number of 39 in each group or class. Each group had a different classroom experience, ranging from the traditional lecture format (class of 2012), to the beginning but incomplete introduction of flipping the classroom (2013) to flipping complete (2104).The same comprehensive departmental final exam was given for all three classes for all three years. Table 1 shows the gender and class and gender of the subjects in this study, all of whom were African-American.

The exam scores were analyzed using the one-way analysis of variance method and Tukey's Post Hoc Test in order to test the difference in the means of the groups of final exams. The analysis of variance results indicates the existence of high variances of the scores both within the specific classes and between groups or classes. Table 2 shows the results of the means test. Also, in table 2, the $F_{2,114}$ value is 3.15, which is determined to have a probability level of .046605. Thus the null hypothesis is not supported. The research question is answered: The students who were exposed to and were taught with the flipping methodology had higher final exam scores than the students who experienced the traditional lecture method. This one finding is true at a statistically significant level of .0466, or just a little more probable than the commonly accepted .05. The second

experimental group, which had moderate flipping only, was not significantly different from the control group. This might suggest the requirement of a potential threshold of flipping activity necessary before a significant impact of exam grades can be observed.

TABLE 2:
Anova Summary: Test of Final Exam Means
for the Three Classes

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
BG Effect	84,496	2	2520	3.15	0.0466
WG Error	5,040	114	799		
Total	89,536	116			

While the anova analysis examines this study’s main research question of whether flipping the classroom affects the final exam scores of the samples in this study, it does not address the question of the relationship between the specific classes or groups. Therefore the Tukey Post Hoc Test was done to test the significant differences between specific groups. According to the results of the test, only the means between the low flipping group (from 2012) and the high flipping group (from 2014) are significantly different from each other. The mean of the medium flipping group is numerically greater than the low flipping group, but they are not statistically different from each other. In that sense, the hypothesis is only partially supported because those who studied under the partially flipped condition did not have statistically significant mean score differences than the students who had the lecture only format.

It is also clear from Table 1 that the females in the study outnumbered the males, thus, they likely had a greater effect on the final exam mean scores due to sheer numbers. This study did not include a gender variable analysis however.

DISCUSSION

The study’s findings provide several points of convergence with previous studies, although different in some ways. First, these finding show that the flipping experience does increase final exam grades over traditional lecture for college students, as it does for most of the articles reviewed in this paper (e.g., Dwortzan, 2012). This sample of black college students also had higher grades affected by this flipping format used. Flipping the classroom seems to restore the connection lost from the lecture-only teaching style because teachers move around the classroom to interact with students and it breaks down barriers between student-teacher. It seems to also create more interest and more active, rather than passive participation. This fosters more connectedness and more learning

taking place in class through exercises, cases and applications. This greater knowledge translates to better grades. Accordingly, this finding suggests that a change in teaching style from a traditional lecture style to flipping style would possibly create better learning and grades.

It is suggested here that having the class reach a threshold level of flipping may be necessary in order for flipping to have an effect. The analysis of the data in this study showed that the moderately flipped class did not receive the same benefit of statistically significantly higher grades than the low flipping control group. How much flipping should take place to receive the benefit and what proportion of students receives a benefit? What particular activities are most or least effective in turning on the switch? Can we distinguish different activities by their impact on the masses of students compared to those activities that only have an impact on a small segment of students? Are there some activities that are only effective in certain circumstances? Are some exercises more cost effective than others? Is flipping different for women vs. men? Which independent learning aids are most effective? Further study is needed to answer these questions.

The students used in this study were not engineering, science or math students as they were in many of the previous studies. These were business students in a management class with a large behavioral management component. But the flipping effect worked nonetheless, as Brame (2012) suggested it would. The design of this study also supported those previous researchers. However, in terms of designing future flipping studies, a need exists for students to prepare before class. This point was made by Brame, who assigned chapter questions to be submitted before class started. However, in order to motivate students, this assignment must be given significant value in terms of points. If students read before class, it makes the in-class activity more effective, but without preparation, it becomes very difficult if not impossible, for students to benefit. This study, like others, employed many of the same before-class preparation resource options for students including the lecture video. It also included many other methods like power point presentations, cases, exercises, the etextbook, etc. In addition, one difference is that the present study also used an on-line lab provided by the textbook publisher, which enabled the students to test themselves, and get feedback before class. The lab also contains the textbook as well as other electronic resources.

While it is pointed out here as a limitation that we did not partial out the effects of gender in this study, it is possible that there was a significant gender influence due to the much larger enrollment of females in all samples. However, the ratio gender bias was constant in all groups in this study, not just some. Future research should definitely test for gender effects. It is even conceivable that women may be able to more effectively navigate the active in class-exercises better than men which could, even in this present study, increase the bias of gender effects just from sheer numbers alone. Another limitation of this study

is that it did not attempt to determine which of the various aids and resources are more or less effective than others, if a difference exists. In fact, it has been suggested by other researchers that flipping presents a type of learning opportunity that matches a variety of different learning styles, from lectures to power points, study quiz aids, flash cards, etc. The representativeness of this study is also a limitation as the number of participants was small for both men and women, which limits generalization of results.

The major finding of the study is: By flipping the class, the teacher will likely engender positive effects on student exam performance and learning. This study confirms and expands that finding among this population of students. Included in this population of students are both business students who are also African-American. This paper also expands the thinking in terms of samples that include significantly more women than men. It seems reasonable to assume that a woman may be better prepared for the flipping process as they are more verbal and often more sociable in an academic setting. Women, more than men, are likely to stop by the professor's office for a chat. Also, it is possible that a threshold of flipping activity is required before an effect is observed. This could have implications for practitioners and students. For those teachers who want to increase the performance of their students but may also want to lecture, there may be a level of flipping necessary to turn on the switch. But knowing the level of flipping required to accomplish the greater performance would be necessary. More research should be done to study the question of thresholds for the various levels of flipping. This line of research would have future implications also for students, including choosing to make self-learning plans that utilize the number and type of flipping activities that would accomplish their individual goals. Again, more research would be helpful for students to benefit. One might envision self-learning situations in which a student's knowledge of how flipping works could result in a "self-flip". Lastly, the study results suggest the need to evaluate the various resource options in terms of efficacy. This would streamline the process of flipping by eliminating un-utilized resources.

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PROCESS AND PRACTICE: IMPROVING WRITING ABILITY, CONFIDENCE IN WRITING, AND AWARENESS OF WRITING SKILLS' IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of a two-semester writing-focused program on freshman students' perceived improvements in writing ability, confidence in writing, and recognition of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success. Participants were taught a five step writing process and were required to complete 10 writing assignments each semester using the five steps. The pre-test post-test design required participants to complete a questionnaire at the end of each semester that measured perceived improvements in ability, confidence, and awareness of the importance of writing skills. Mean responses on the pre-test showed improvements in all three areas, and means and t-tests results indicated additional improvements at the end of the second semester. However, only grammar, organization, and recognition of academic importance showed a significant improvement. The findings support the use of a writing process and practice to provide business students with a vital skill for academic and career success.

INTRODUCTION

Communication skills are critically important for both academic performance and career success. Both educators and employers emphasize the importance of oral (Barker & Hall, 1995; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997) as well as written (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Quible & Griffin, 2007) communication skills. However, more emphasis has been placed on written communication skills in recent years as technological advancements such as e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging devices have become more common, and as businesses focus more on knowledge and sharing (Brandt, 2005). While business educators and employers agree that effective writing skills are important in higher education as well as in the workplace (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), researchers suggest that many business students may lack this important skill (Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007; Quible & Griffin, 2007).

Although numerous researchers have addressed methods for improving writing skills, many of these studies only provide suggestions or a list of tips to follow rather than a teachable process to facilitate improvements. Also, while some studies document improvements in writing skills, most of the suggested techniques are implemented in upper level courses with minimal effort to address writing deficiencies or needed improvements during the earlier years of college.

In this study, we extend the existing literature by examining student perceptions relevant to improvements in writing ability, confidence in writing, and recognition of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success after completing two freshman courses that emphasize the use of a writing process and require the completion of 20 writing assignments. We propose a process and practice approach for teaching business writing skills and improving the writing skills of business graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Perspective

While educators and employers agree that writing proficiency is a critical ingredient for success in both higher education and the workplace, there is a strong consensus that many graduates lack effective writing skills (Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007; Quible & Griffin, 2007). Business educators have been criticized for not developing students' writing skills and are facing pressures to implement curriculum changes to address writing deficiencies. This is especially true for business educators attempting to meet assurance of learning (AOL) standards set by accrediting agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). AOL standards require that colleges of business provide evidence of student learning by directly and indirectly measuring the attainment of skills and knowledge (AACSB, 2006). Ironically, one of the core competences emphasized as important by the AACSB is the ability to communicate effectively (AACSB, 2011).

Business educators frequently express concerns about the writing deficiencies of students (Marcal, Hennessey, Curren, & Roberts, 2005; Rieber, 2005). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002) indicates that many American students lack effective writing skills and are neither prepared for writing in college nor for subsequent internships or jobs. Researchers corroborate that many students enter college with writing deficiencies (NAEP, 2002), that writing skills do not substantially improve through four years of college (Bacon & Anderson, 2004), and that many MBA students lack effective writing skills (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012). Thus, many graduates lack an important skill that could contribute to their career success.

Many department chairs in business colleges also believe that writing skills are some of the most important skills for business graduates to master. Consequently, they suggest that business communication courses should focus on writing memos, letters, and reports that require business students to demonstrate their mastery of content, mechanics, and organization (Wardrope, 2002). Early academic requirements justify the need to focus on business writing prior to the business communication course taken in the sophomore or junior year. Addressing writing skills at the freshman level allows students to be better prepared for writing assignments in classes at higher levels.

Employers' Perspective

Employers consistently rank effective writing as one of the most important skills for business graduates to possess (Mitchell, 2008; Young & Murphy, 2003). Researchers suggest that effective writing skills are correlated with job placement (Stevens, 2005), career success (Rowh, 2006), and financial rewards (Fisher, 1999). According to the National Association of Colleges and Employment, employers list communication as the most important soft skill for college graduates to be successful in the workplace (2010); however, many of them express concerns over the writing deficiencies of newly hired college graduates (Henricks, 2007; NACE, 2011). In an attempt to rectify this deficiency, employers have spent billions of dollars on training to improve employees' writing skills (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Smerd, 2007). Consequently there is a consensus among employers that effective writing is an area in which improvements need to be made, and that college courses should include more rigorous writing and editing standards (Stevens, 2005).

Alumni Perspectives

College alumni have ranked communication courses as the courses that contributed the most to their career advancement and promotion (Gustafson, Johnson, & Hovey, 1993). Ironically, graduates and alumni also highlight communication skills as most lacking in their overall educational training (Page, 2005).

Preparing Business Students to Write

In order to meet the rising demand for writing skill improvement, educators have been experimenting with various techniques for assessing and improving business students' writing skills. Assessment techniques such as manual essay grading and computer-scored essay grading have been developed for students majoring in various areas of business (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Riordan, Riordan, & Sullivan, 2000).

Although assessment practices can be instrumental in evaluating writing and identifying writing deficiencies, it is also necessary to implement techniques for improving writing in order to address any deficiencies. A significant amount of research has been focused on methods for improving writing skills; however, many of the studies simply give a list of tips or guidelines (Rowh, 2006). While suggestions such as knowing grammar and

punctuation rules, being clear and concise, and using the right tone should be followed, these tips are insufficient for developing effective writing skills. They are useful only when students actively engage in the writing process, and they must be continually practiced for real skill development.

As part of their experimenting with various techniques for improving writing skills and better preparing students for successful careers, business educators have used a number of techniques which have proven to be effective. Some of these techniques include practice and feedback (Ericsson, 2006; Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), peer review (Rieber, 2006), grade incentive for improvement (Bacon & Anderson, 2004), and intensive training (Beeler, Burke, & Turner, 2001). Additionally, researchers emphasize the need for continuous instruction on the fundamentals of writing (Pittenger, Miller, & Allison, 2006) and writing throughout the curriculum (Riordan et al., 2000) to further develop effective writing skills. However, in only a few studies have researchers collected data to measure improvements in writing based on the application of the recommended techniques.

Simply imparting information about writing to students is insufficient. They also need to be trained as writers with opportunities to practice and to apply their knowledge and skills (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007) so that they can learn by actually writing documents, receiving feedback, and making revisions (Ashbaugh, 1994). This learning process is similar to that applied in teaching someone to ride a bicycle or to play a guitar. Someone could receive months of classroom instruction, but actual mastery of the skill requires a lot of practice.

Specifically, the ability to write effectively requires more than just the knowledge of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction, thesis statements, topic sentences, links in paragraphs, and organization of text. These are, of course, foundational to the writing process; however, in addition to knowing and being able to apply rules of writing correctness, students must be able to think critically and creatively in order to develop content for a writing assignment (Locke & Brazelton, 1997). It is also beneficial for students to identify their own specific writing weaknesses or challenges faced in order to make improvements in their writing skills (Ortiz, 2012). Recently, researchers have learned that improvements in confidence and self-efficacy relevant to writing ability can lead to improvements in writing skills (Likkell, 2012; Mascle, 2013).

Despite the importance placed on effective writing skills by recruiters and employers, the development of these skills has traditionally received limited attention in most business programs (Page, 2005). Most business students take one business communication course during the sophomore or junior year (Wardrope, 2002). This paucity of writing emphasis leaves room for concern about the effectiveness of a single course to improve business students' writing skills (Wardrope, 2002). It also indicates that business students spend

equal or less time developing effective business writing skills as they spend learning topics such as history, geography, psychology, or fine arts. Although these subjects are important, they are peripheral to a major in business.

In many business courses, students focus on developing critical thinking skills by analyzing problems or opportunities, and then identifying, evaluating, selecting, and implementing solutions. While such analytic skills are necessary, more is required. Business majors must also be able to communicate their findings - both orally and in writing.

Importance of the Freshman Year

According to Geiser and Studley (2001), the single best indicator of success during the freshman year is the ability to compose text, followed by the development of informative and analytical writing ability during the remaining college years (Benjamin & Chun, 2003). Another researcher concluded that students could benefit from developing proofreading and editing skills during the freshman year for improvements in writing skills throughout college (Enos, 2010).

Despite a plethora of research documenting the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, few studies have focused on teaching and facilitating a writing process for developing freshman writing skills and in even fewer have researchers collected data to gauge perceived improvements in writing skills (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012; Riordan et al., 2000; Rowe, 2006). In this study, we examine student perceptions regarding improvements in their writing skills, increased confidence, and their awareness of the importance of their writing skills at the completion of two consecutive semesters using the writing process.

Research Question 1: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of improvements in their writing ability?

Research Question 2: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of improvements in their confidence in writing?

Research Question 3: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success?

There is a gap in the literature relevant to the impact of the role of the writing process on improving writing skills over a period of time. This impact of the extended use of both process and practice on student perceptions of writing improvements would justify the need for early intervention strategies to facilitate the development of effective writing skills.

Research Question 4: Does extended use of the writing process result in additional improvements in student writing skills, confidence, and their awareness of the importance of writing?

In this study, we examine students' perceptions regarding improvements in their writing ability, increased confidence in their ability to write, and their awareness of the importance of writing skills after completing two freshman courses and 20 writing assignments over two consecutive semesters.

METHOD

We used a pre-test/post-test experimental design method to gauge changes in student opinions relevant to improvements in their writing skills, confidence in writing, and their awareness of the importance of business writing skills. Participants for the study were freshman business majors at an accredited institution in the southeast. The students were enrolled in two core courses in consecutive semesters, Freshman Seminar-101 and Introduction to Business-150; in both courses, students were required to complete 10 writing assignments each semester using a process and practice approach aimed at improving writing skills.

We taught and facilitated use of a step-by-step writing process during the two semesters for each of the 20 writing assignments. The topics that we selected were relevant to their academic studies the first semester (college courses in general, strategies for success, careers) and to business the second semester (ethics, social responsibility, management, marketing). The writing process consisted of the following steps:

Topic Introduction and Discussion. The instructor introduces the topic and facilitates brainstorming of relevant ideas, which students record in random order.

Outline and Rough Draft. Students refine their list and develop an outline by adding or deleting ideas, grouping related ideas, and then organizing the ideas in order. Each student then types and prints a rough draft.

Review and Revision. Assignments are subjected to a multi-stage review and revise process.

- Self Review-after sufficient time has passed to avoid skim reading
- Peer Review-during class with written comments and verbal discussion
- Electronic Review-using the Criterion ETS, an online writing evaluation program that provides diagnostic feedback and automated scoring
- Instructor Review-feedback on additional revisions

Identification of Challenges. Students are encouraged to review all feedback and list specific areas to concentrate on for future writing assignments in an effort to identify writing weaknesses and determine areas to focus on for improving writing skills.

Final Revision and Submission. Students submit the final assignment for a grade. (It is important to use a rubric for grading and to provide students with a copy of the rubric when the assignment is given. It is also useful for students to compare the final version of the assignment to the rough drafts to see the improvement process.)

The writing process taught and facilitated during the two semesters incorporates a series of techniques considered important for developing writing skills that starts with topic development, emphasizes multiple steps for review and revision, and encourages identification and improvement of writing weaknesses. The process starts with topic development to encourage students to generate and organize ideas prior to writing. This should lead to more creative writing and better organization and flow of ideas. The process also emphasizes the use of a multi-step approach to review and revision to encourage students to closely review and continuously improve their writing. The final area of emphasis in the writing process encourages students to critically evaluate their writing and identify their writing weaknesses to determine specific areas that should be focused on for future writing assignments.

At the end of each semester, we asked the students to complete a questionnaire to measure their perceptions relevant to improvements in their writing skills, confidence in writing, and awareness of the importance of writing skills. In the questionnaire, we included a section on improvements in writing skills that covered overall improvement as well as improvements in sentences, paragraphs, punctuation, grammar, and organization. A sample question would be, "My ability to develop complete and accurate sentences has improved."

In the questionnaire section on confidence, we included a list of possible ranges of perceptions such as 'more confident, score higher, and less apprehensive.' A sample question might be, "I am less apprehensive about completing writing assignments."

In the final section of the questionnaire, we covered their awareness of the importance of writing skills for college, business students, and business careers. An example of a question in this section of the questionnaire would be, "Effective writing skills are important for career success." The questionnaire contained 12 items using a 5-point scale from 5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree. We also asked demographic questions such as age and gender for classification purposes.

RESULTS

At the end of the first semester, 225 students completed the pre-test questionnaire; this number included 119 males and 106 females. At the end of the second semester, 210 students completed the post-test questionnaire; this number included 115 males and 95 females due to attrition that occurred between semesters. The majority of the respondents who completed the instruments were between the ages of 18 and 21. We conducted t-tests for each survey item based on demographic characteristics, and we found that there were no significant differences based on gender or age.

Improvement

Mean responses on the pre- and post-test were computed for each item, followed by t-test and p-values comparing the pre- and post-test results. From the pre-test results, we conclude that that students believed that their writing skills had improved at the end of the first semester. As shown in Table 1, the means on the pre-test were high for overall improvement (m = 3.64), sentences (m = 3.58), paragraphs (m = 3.64), punctuation (m = 3.55), grammar (m = 3.52), and organization (m = 3.72). Since the means were higher on the posttest, the students indicated that they were continuing to improve from the first semester to the second semester for all 6 variables: overall improvement (m = 3.79), sentences (m = 3.63), paragraphs (m = 3.72), punctuation (m = 3.62), grammar (m = 3.73), and organization (m = 3.89). Additionally, the students' responses indicate significant increases for overall improvement (p = .03), grammar (p = .01), and organization (p = .02) from the pre-test to the posttest.

TABLE 1

Means, SD, and p-values for Improvement Variables

	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t-test (p-value)
Overall Improvement	3.64 (0.83)	3.79 (0.57)	-1.82 (0.03)*
Sentences	3.58 (0.87)	3.63 (0.67)	-0.61 (0.27)
Paragraphs	3.64 (0.85)	3.72 (0.68)	-1.00 (0.16)
Punctuation	3.55 (0.86)	3.62 (0.69)	-0.92 (0.18)
Grammar	3.52 (0.88)	3.73 (0.79)	-2.33 (0.01)*
Organization	3.72 (0.85)	3.89 (0.64)	-2.01 (0.02)*

Note: Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.
*t-tests and p-values shown in bold are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Confidence

Student responses on the pre-test indicate perceived improvements in their confidence after completing the first semester. As shown in Table 2, students were more confident about writing ($m = 3.76$), expected higher scores ($m = 3.89$), and were less apprehensive about future writing assignments ($m = 3.58$). The means increased from the pre-test to the post-test for all three variables: confidence ($m = 3.85$), score higher ($m = 3.94$), and apprehension ($m = 3.69$). However, the increases in the means from the pre-test to the post-test were not significant with p-values of 0.14, 0.30, and 0.10 respectively.

TABLE 2
Means, SD, and p-values for Confidence Variables

	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t-test (p-value)
Overall Confidence	3.76 (0.84)	3.85 (0.73)	-1.08 (0.14)
Expect Higher Scores	3.89 (0.83)	3.94 (0.69)	-0.54 (0.30)
Less Apprehensive	3.58 (0.77)	3.69 (0.76)	-1.29 (0.10)

Note. Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

Importance

The highest overall means were found in the category addressing their awareness of the importance of writing and indicated that students are more aware of the importance of effective writing skills. As shown in Table 3, the pre-test means were high relative to the importance of writing skills for academic performance ($m = 4.50$), business students ($m = 4.47$), and career success ($m = 4.55$). The mean scores increased from the pre-test to the post-test for all three variables: college ($m = 4.60$), business students ($m = 4.53$), and career ($m = 4.56$) indicating that students were even more aware of the importance of effective writing skills for success in college, for success in their major as a business student, and for their overall career success. However, we found that the only significant increase was the importance of writing skills for academic success ($p = .04$).

TABLE 3
Means, SD, and p-values for Importance of Writing Skills

	Pre-test Mean SD	Post-test Mean SD	t-test (p-value)
Academic Success	4.50 (0.50)	4.60 (0.32)	-1.75 (0.04)*
Business Majors	4.47 (0.51)	4.53 (0.37)	-1.05 (0.15)
Career Success	4.55 (0.45)	4.56 (0.33)	-0.25 (0.40)

Note. Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree.
*t-tests and p-values shown in bold are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

DISCUSSION

In this exploratory study, we found support for the use of process and practice to improve business writing skills. After completion of their first semester using this approach, students believed that they had improved their written abilities in the areas of constructing sentences, paragraphs, punctuation, grammar, and organization. Since the means for all the variables were above 3.5 on the pre-test, we conclude that this indicates the positive impact that can result by teaching and facilitating the application of a step-by-step writing process that includes topic development, a multi-step approach to review and revision of a document, and identifying writing challenges.

Additionally, the students perceived that their overall confidence in their ability to write had improved. They expected higher scores on writing assignments and were less apprehensive overall about writing. Results also indicate that students were more aware of the importance of effective writing skills for academic success, business majors, and career success. We found that the results support all three Research Questions pertinent to the impact of the writing process on perceived improvements in writing skills, confidence in writing, and awareness of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success.

At the end of their second semester, students again reported that they believed their writing skills had improved. The means for all post-test variables were above 3.6. We believe that these data not only provide support for Research Question 4, but also provide

support for extended practice using a writing process to improve student writing skills, confidence in writing, and raise their awareness of the importance of writing.

We posit that the high means on the pre-test and the increase in the means for every variable on the post-test indicate that use of a writing process and practice can have a positive impact on student perceptions of personal success and improvement in their writing skills, their confidence in writing, and a realization of the importance of writing for academic and career success. We believe that these results further support the use of early intervention strategies, such as the one we used, to develop effective writing skills for both academic and career success.

While the means for each variable increased from the pre-test to the post-test indicating continued improvement, the only significant differences were for overall improvements, grammar, organization, and academic success. We suggest that this may indicate that the process and practice approach had a greater impact on improving writing skills and on creating a greater realization of the importance of writing for academic success, and less impact on improving confidence in writing and realizing the importance of writing for career success. We believe that this may be an indication that extended practice (beyond two semesters) is necessary to improve students' confidence in writing, and that educators should emphasize the importance of writing skills for career success and not only for achieving better grades.

An interesting finding was the significant increase from the pre-test to the post-test in student understanding of the relation of academic success to the ability to write. In fact, the relationship to academic success was the overall highest mean on the post-test. We believe these results indicate a possible relationship between realizing the importance of writing skills and students making improvements in writing. Thus, if educators emphasize the importance of writing skills for academic success, this could lead to student improvements in writing skills.

Clearly, the most significant result was in the area of grammar. In the pre-test, grammar had the overall lowest mean; yet, on the post-test, grammar showed the most significant increase. This may be an indication of a strong positive relationship between practice and improving grammar.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings of this study support the use of a process approach to writing and practice to provide business students with one of the skills most vital for their academic and career success. We believe that there are several implications of this study for future research and practical application.

First, educators should teach and facilitate the use of a writing process similar to the one outlined in this study to improve students' writing skills, increase their confidence, and emphasize the importance of writing. The steps taught should emphasize writing as a process that starts with idea generation, includes multiple opportunities for review and revision, and identifies weaknesses for writing improvement.

Second, educators should implement techniques to improve student writing, not only for one or two semesters but also over time in order to realize continued improvements in their writing skills, confidence in their writing abilities, and increase their awareness of the importance of writing.

Third, any intervention aimed at improving writing skills should be implemented early in the curriculum to facilitate development of effective writing skills for academic and career success. We suggest beginning in the first semester of students' freshman year.

Fourth, educators should emphasize the use of the writing process and the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success throughout the curriculum, not only in writing-specific courses.

We believe that the findings of this exploratory study support the need for more research on the techniques and practices necessary to provide business students with effective writing skills. One suggestion for future studies is to focus on using both direct and indirect measurement techniques to assess and improve business writing skills by comparing student perceptions on improving writing skills to actual improvements. This would allow for use of a triangulation method to compare improvements in writing skills, and would move colleges of business one step closer to compliance with AOL standards that require evidence of student learning by directly and indirectly measuring the attainment of effective writing skills (AACSB, 2006).

We also suggest soliciting input from professors on strengths and weaknesses of student writing skills in order to identify specific target areas for improvement. It would correspondingly be useful to measure student perceptions of their writing skills and compare it to employer perceptions. Informing students of these differences might make a powerful impression on the need to hone their writing skills.

Another possibility for research includes educators' using business clients for class projects and soliciting their perceptions of students' end-products, such as formal business reports, resumes, cover letters, etc. These employer perceptions would be shared with the students along with any recommendations for improvement.

Business educators should focus specific class assignments across the array of business disciplines to highlight the connection of the importance of writing to success in business

careers. Given the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, business programs could benefit from emphasizing these critical skills early in the program and throughout the curricula.

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MARKETING HIGH PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS: A CASE STUDY OF HOW AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY TEACHES EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Abstract

American companies have complained that students entering the workforce do not have the skills to meet the challenges of a high-performance workplace. To that end, marketing professionals and academics have sought to identify the skills graduates need to succeed in today's competitive marketplace. They agree graduates must have hard and soft skills or employability skills rather than specific marketing knowledge. This article describes an innovative professional skills-based course developed at a large U.S. public university that is helping marketing students increase their employability. It details how the course was modified to mimic the workplace. It lists the course topics, how they translate to specific skills, and the unique methods used to teach the skills. These methods have lift and can be re-used throughout the students' careers.

Keywords: employability, education, hard and soft skills, case study, active learning, university

INTRODUCTION

For decades, American companies have complained that students entering the workforce do not have the skills to meet the challenges of a high-performance workplace. A plethora of reports by industry and academia have confirmed this as well as warned that the global economy and rapid technological change will require a more highly skilled and flexible workforce (Bailey 1997; Candy & Crebert, 1991; Lavelle, 2012). To that end, marketing professionals and academics have sought to identify the knowledge and skills graduates need to secure employment in such an environment (Gray, Ottesen, Bell, Chapman, & Whiten, 2007; Melaia, Abratt, & Bick, G., 2008). Colleges and universities have traditionally focused their curriculums on the knowledge of a field, instead of the requisite skills needed in order to get hired and succeed in that same field. Employers have affirmed the marketing knowledge taught in most marketing pedagogy by universities, however, they also expect graduates to be able to communicate

professionally, listen, multi-task, problem solve, think critically, and work with people – hard and soft skills not normally taught in core marketing courses.

This article addresses the gap between what colleges and universities teach and what employers expect – the employability gap. It starts with asking such imperative questions as: *What skills do employers expect from marketing graduates? What skills should marketing educators teach? How can marketing educators better prepare students to enter a rapidly changing workplace?* Then, it expands on the last question with a case study of the approach used at a large US public university where all business students are required to take a skills-based course in their business discipline. In the field of marketing, the skills-based course is focused on preparing students for a rapidly changing workforce. This article describes how the course was initially developed and how it has since evolved. It expounds on the topics, skills, and methods in the course. Finally, it concludes with the course evaluations and conclusions as well as future considerations for the course.

THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP FOR MARKETING GRADUATES

Marketing professionals and academics seek to identify the critical components of marketing education, in particular, the knowledge and skills graduates need to secure employment and to develop into a successful professional. Common criticisms of business school graduates revolve around their lack of oral and written communication and interpersonal skills, their intolerance for ambiguity, and their inability to think critically — key skills for marketing majors (Johnson, 2011; Lavelle, 2012; Porter, 2007). This lack of skills – real or perceived – is likely the reason marketing and business executives express a preference for liberal arts graduates. Liberal arts graduates are perceived as "strong" whereas business school graduates are perceived as "weak" (Chonko and Caballero, 1991). A recent survey of more than 1,000 employers in various industries asked whether student applicants possess the skills to thrive in the workplace. More than half of the employers said finding qualified applicants were difficult, and just fewer than half said students should receive specific workplace training rather than a more broad-based education (Johnson, 2011). Marketing professionals are employed in varied industries, which present a challenge in determining all the possible skills students need to be employable. This leads to a constant search for the best blend of skills that would prepare marketing graduates for their professional careers.

What skills do employers expect from marketing graduates?

The challenges of competing in the global economy and ever-changing technological advancements have necessitated a redesign of the workplace into an innovative work environment known as the high-performance workplace. The evolving work environment requires a behavior and orientation toward work, which is beyond the step-by-step tasks.

It expects employees at all levels to solve problems, create ways to improve the methods they use, and engage effectively with their coworkers (Bailey, 1997).

Employers expect marketing graduates to have two broad sets of skills. The first set can be classified as marketing knowledge. A robust list of marketing knowledge can be found in materials from the Future Business Leaders of America – Phi Beta Lambda (FBLA-PBL). FBLA-PBL is a nonprofit education association with a quarter million students preparing for careers in business and business-related fields for post-secondary students, alumni, and educators. Because marketing knowledge is well-documented, this article will not discuss them. In addition, with some qualitative variations in teaching delivery and specialized materials, the curriculum is similar across colleges and universities. The second set of skills can be characterized as hard and soft skills. These types of skills, if not acquired, may not provide marketing graduates with a distinct advantage over other college majors in securing a marketing job and having continued success throughout their career. The terminology associated with the hard and soft skills is ‘employability skills’. For the remainder of this article, they will be used interchangeably.

There are many definitions for employability skills. Employability skills are defined as “being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work” (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). They are also defined as “those personal and cognitive capabilities people use to carry out a wide range of tasks and activities” (Dearing, 1997). The American Society for Training and Development or ASTD (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990) is leading foundational work in identifying employability skills, often used as benchmarks or beginning points for international, national, state, and regional studies. The ASTD study identified six groups across all job families: (1) Basic Competency Skills – reading, writing, computation; (2) Communication Skills – speaking, listening; (3) Adaptability Skills – problem solving, thinking creatively; (4) Developmental Skills – self-esteem, motivation, goal-setting, career planning; (5) Group Effectiveness Skills – interpersonal skills, teamwork, negotiation; and (6) Influencing Skills – understanding organizational culture, sharing leadership.

What skills should marketing educators teach?

Employability is an important outcome of education, especially with business-oriented majors such as marketing. Numerous articles and studies discuss the skills students should develop in general as well as in business and marketing courses (Bennett, Dunne, and Carré, 1999; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Zinser, 2003). However, most colleges and universities remain steadfast and continue to focus their teaching on the core functional skills required for the marketing curriculum. They do not customize the marketing curriculum to the demands of the workplace. In a 2006 article, Dacko (2006) reviewed the curriculum of more than 200 business schools. A number of schools had skills courses, which cover specific skills (e.g., communication, writing, speaking, and sales). Only eight schools had a dedicated professional skills course in their curriculum. None of

the schools had a professional skills course in the marketing curriculum. The article concluded marketing graduates are often under-prepped in employability skills and over-prepped in marketing knowledge.

Academia frustration with industry is likely an ideological one, viewing their role as to produce knowledge learners and not future employees with the skills that meet the needs of companies. For business schools and marketing educators, this position is less tolerable given the vocational nature of business education and the business world as well as the governing body for business accreditation. In 2013, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has established a new Standard 4 that requires evidence of job acceptance rates (AACSB, 2013). Hence, some institutions are changing and making a significant effort to align their courses with 'real world' work environments (Candy and Crebert, 1991).

How can marketing education better prepare students to enter a rapidly changing workplace?

The AACSB has heard employers criticize business schools for producing graduates without employability skills such as vision and problem finding, insufficient emphasis on creativity for problem solving, over emphasis on quantitative methods and under emphasis on critical thinking about the external environment in their curriculum (Nicastro and Jones, 1994; Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Also, some employers have even suggested marketing education should focus less on the transmission of marketing knowledge and more on skill development (Cunningham, 1995; Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

There is evidence that teaching embedded skills rather than teaching standalone skills is a stronger approach to acquiring skills. Further evidence shows experiential learning combined with reflective techniques is a positive way to teach required business and professional skills (Baker and Henson, 2010; Stubbs and Keeping, 2002). Professional accreditation is seen as important, but institutions should be careful not to overload modules or design the course too closely to one specific employer's needs.

Experiential and active learning is a step in the right direction to closing the employability gap. Experiential learning focuses on stimulating learning processes and provides more concrete experiences to learn traditional concepts (Bascoul et al., 2013). This approach requires students to practice what they learned in contrast to more traditional lecture and test approaches used in colleges and institutions and marketing courses specifically.

To pursue the skills needed to close the employability gap requires research and experimentation on appropriate skill sets. A substantial literature review found several diverse suggestions and applications, but no comprehensive skills set. To this end, the

author has identified specific employability or hard and soft skills using an experiential and active learning approach.

CASE STUDY

The case study was developed at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). CSULA is part of the largest four-year public university system (California State University) in the U.S. The university has a student body of approximately 22,000. The demographics of the student body reflect ongoing trends in public universities that have an increasing urban-based population: culturally diverse, older, and more female. CSULA is approximately 53% Hispanic, 16% Asian, 11% White, 5% African American; 60% female; the average age is 23.5 years for undergraduate students and 32.3 years for graduate students. The case study is based on a marketing skills-based course titled 'High Performance Professional Skills' (HPPS).

Course Development

HPPS was developed in response to an AACSB sponsored study on business education and development (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). The study findings advocated a skills-based approach to business education. CSULA business administrators, faculty, students, and potential employers' input were obtained and all parties agreed to emphasize skills development in the curriculum, specific to the major and in so doing, the career to follow. Each business discipline developed a skills-based course and made it required for their major.

Course Objectives

HPPS is a four-hour, undergraduate, core requirement for all marketing majors. HPPS has two course prerequisites: principles of marketing and business communications. Most students who take the course are juniors and seniors. The course has the following broad objectives:

1. Identify career/life skills and demonstrate the importance of developing these skills.
2. Develop employable professional skills through conceptual understanding; analysis; self, peer, and faculty assessments; application; and career and team building projects using active learning.
3. Enhance skills developed in other courses in the business school.

Course Methodology

The traditional lecture and discussion methods are integrated with active learning in-class assignments, take-home assignments, team projects, and individual projects. The course simulates the expectations of Corporate America's work environment. This required rethinking course requirements, policies, delivery, and grading. Each of these components is presented below.

Course Requirements. The required reading for the course is the popular book, “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Dr. Stephen Covey. This book has been a bestseller for many years and is often required reading for many executives and their companies. The course also includes other books, additional articles, assessments, an original fictitious team case project, and a direct marketing campaign applied to a career goal. Students are graded as follows:

- Exams: The course has no exams (midterms or finals) since most marketing graduates will work in areas where there are no exams (unlike accountants or information technology graduates). The students’ response to this approach typically follows a 360-degree trajectory. The initial reaction is they are pleasantly surprised since this is not typical of most courses. However, after completing the course work, the next reaction is they would have preferred taking exams after all. At the end of the course, the final reaction is a sense of accomplishment and appreciation of the learning and skills they have acquired.
- Coursework: The course has assignments, assessments, and public speaking requirements, which comprise 30% of the course grade. An additional 10% of the course grade is based on peer team evaluations from the team projects. The remainder 60% of the course grade is based on the team projects and the direct marketing campaign applied toward a career goal.

Course Policies. The course has the same traditional policies as any other course syllabi such as: absences, academic dishonesty and plagiarism, classroom etiquette, class preparation, communication with the instructor, etc. However, the course modifies some policies to prepare students for the expectations of the workplace. The modifications are listed below.

- Punctuality: Students must be on time. Roll call is taken at the beginning of the class. If students are not in their seats before the official start time of class, then they are not on time. If students are late, then they lose 2 points from the final course grade. Punctuality is required for each class. In Corporate America, most employees are not required to punch in and punch out. If an employee is late, then it is duly noted by his/her peers and management, and can be negative inputs into their performance evaluations.
- Timeliness: All assignments and projects (individual and team) must be turned in on time. Students lose points even if it is a minute late. Coursework turned in after the due date and time is considered late and 20% will be deducted for the first day late and no credit will be given thereafter. There are no makeup opportunities. In Corporate America, turning in work late is not acceptable, and can be negative inputs into performance evaluations.
- Guidelines: Students are required to submit coursework following specific guidelines and are penalized for not doing so. This teaches students to listen and to follow specific instructions. In Corporate America, following instructions is essential

because not doing so can cause critical errors and result in lost productivity and sales and increased costs.

- **Note Taking:** Students must take their own notes. Other than assigned articles, cases, assessments, team projects, and the syllabus, no other handouts are provided. This sets the expectation that not all materials are provided, same as in a business environment, and it is the students' responsibility to create the needed materials. Electronic recording devices are not allowed; this is the same rule followed in Corporate America. The message to the students is not all information will be nicely packaged into a book, article, or course packet. Learning to take notes sharpens critical thinking and listening skills.
- **Grading:** The course does not curve. This establishes the performance expectation for students and dissuades indolent behavior.
- **Electronics:** Electronic devices are not allowed during class unless designated by the in-class exercise. In Corporate America, business protocol is to turn off these devices in professional settings such as meetings with executives and customers.

Course Topics. Since HPPS was first offered in 2000, the course has changed direction. Some topics were determined to be more aligned with other marketing courses and were removed. These topics were replaced and over time expanded with more hard and soft skills needed to succeed in the marketing profession. There are now 24 topics. Table 1 lists the topics covered in 2000 and aligns them to the topics covered in 2014. The topics covered in 2000 with asterisks have been moved to other marketing courses.

**TABLE 1:
HPPS Course Topics in 2000 and 2014**

Topics Covered in HPPS in 2000		Topics Covered in HPPS in 2014	
1	Creativity	Creative Thinking	1
2	Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking	2
		Problem Solving and Decision-Making	3
3	Negotiating	Negotiating	4
		Gaining and Using Power	5
4	Understanding Cultures*	Self-Assessment	6
5	Selling an Idea/Product/Service*	Personal Persuasion	7
6	Managing Conflict	Change Management	8
7	Servicing Customers*	Public Speaking	9
8	Team Building	Team Building	10
		Facilitation	11
9	Leadership	Leadership	12

Topics Covered in HPPS in 2000		Topics Covered in HPPS in 2014	
		Political Capital	13
10	Listening	Listening	14
		Customer Service	15
11	Providing and Receiving Feedback	Interviewing	16
12	Professional Resources and Learning Opportunities	Writing Effectively	17
		Presentation	18
13	Managing Time and Stress	Personal Management	19
		Project Management	20
14	Lifelong Professional Skills Building	Personal Goal Setting	21
		Career Goal Setting	22
		Career Planning and Development	23
		Image	24

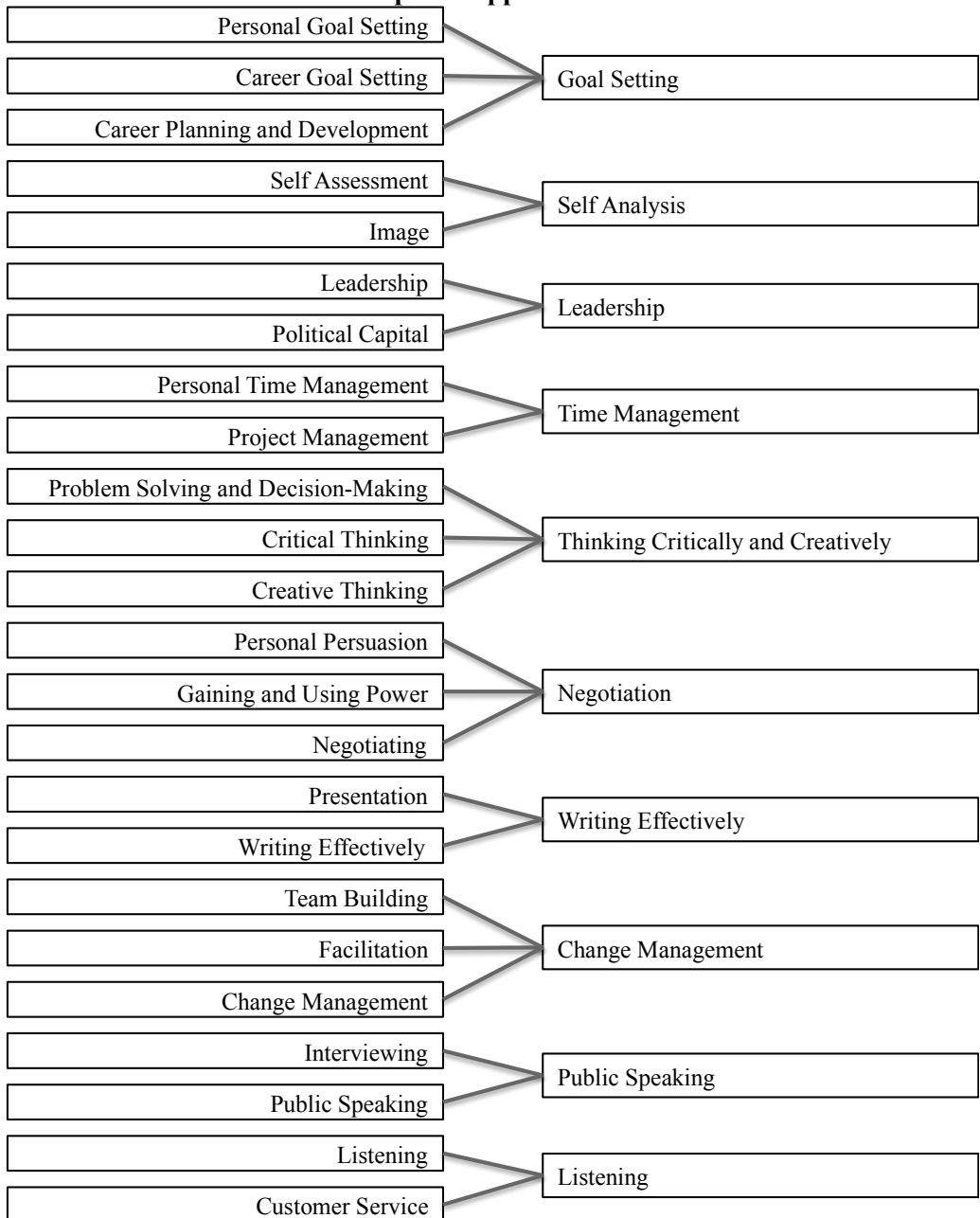
Source: Syllabi of HPPS from 2000 and 2014

Course Topics Mapped to Skills. The course topics can be grouped and mapped to skills. There are a total of 10 dominant skills. Figure 1 depicts the 24 course topics mapped to the 10 dominant skills

Methods Used to Teach the Skills. The course uses various methods to teach the 10 dominant skills. These methods should not be viewed as optional, but should become more mainstream so marketing graduates are empowered with the skills to be successful in today's competitive environment.

- Professional Books: In addition to the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, the course also includes “Who Moved My Cheese”, which is widely used in business to address personal and organizational change. It depicts how different people react to change and contains a powerful message for success. In using professional books in the course, students are encouraged to use them throughout their career.
- Assessments: At the beginning of the course, students complete an initial self-assessment to identify gaps and areas of improvement. They validate and modify this self-assessment with peers and mentors to gain a more unbiased, impartial perspective. At the end of course, they complete the self-assessment again to see how they've improved. They still seek validation from peers and mentors; the expectation is there is a better synchronization of the students' self assessments and the assessments of third parties. In using assessments, students are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are better prepared for the performance evaluations to follow throughout their career.

**FIGURE 1:
HPPS Course Topics Mapped to Dominant Skills**



- **Team Projects:** Students work in teams on various projects and assignments. Each student is required to fill a different role on the team; the same student cannot always be the leader. All students must present. Students learn to identify and leverage each person's strengths and weaknesses, work through conflicts, develop leadership and interpersonal skills, and use project management skills to complete the project on time. A complete work product includes a written paper in Microsoft Word, a presentation in Microsoft PowerPoint (or equivalent), a project plan in Microsoft Project, a visual or diagram in Microsoft Visio, and finally the oral presentation itself to peers (students) and management (instructor and/or business professionals). In using team projects, students are exposed to how work gets done in Corporate America and learn how to overcome challenges.
- **Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal:** This unique project applies the skills of marketing (i.e., market research, marketing plan, marketing campaigns) to help students pursue a career goal. Students use the structure and process steps of conducting a direct marketing campaign, but apply it to their career goals (e.g., finding a job after graduation, being accepted to graduate school, obtaining a new position in their company), in the same manner as a marketing manager would do in the workplace toward the companies' goals. In using this approach, students have increased their retention of the marketing skills taught because they see the relevance to their lives (Jackson 2012).

Table 2 provides examples of each method. In general, methods were added over time and balanced with the course schedule where active learning was critical to facilitating retention. Table 3 identifies the 10 dominant skills applied in each method.

Course Evaluation

One measure of course success is the number of students enrolled who are not required to take the course. HPPS has been offered at CSULA for 13 years. From 2006 to 2013, 53 sections were offered totaling approximately 2,491 students. Approximately 20 percent of the students were non-marketing majors and approximately 10 percent of the 20 percent were not business majors at all.

Another measure of course success is the student evaluations. Table 4 summarizes the responses of approximately 1,200 students from 2009 to 2012. In summary, student gave the course high ratings across all questions, e.g., greater than 4.5 on a 5-point scale. HPPS rated higher than other courses in the Marketing Department for all questions except questions 8 and 11. These ratings are not statistically significant at an alpha level of .05. Often a high evaluation could be biased based upon the overall GPA grade distribution for the course (Eiszler, 2002). On a 4.0 GPA scale, the average GPA for HPPS was 2.47 for this period. This grade distribution is within the departmental norm.

**TABLE 2:
Methods Used to Teach the Skills**

Methods	2000-2001	2002-2004	2005-2008	2009-2011	2012-2014
Professional Books					
7 Habits of Highly Effective People	X	X	X	X	X
Who Moved My Cheese	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Assessments					
Self-Assessment: Skills	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Change Management	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Listening	N/A	N/A	X	X	X
Self-Assessment: Leadership	X	X	X	X	X
Peer Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Faculty Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Mentor Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Team Projects					
Written Presentation	X	X	X	X	X
Oral Presentation	X	X	X	X	X
Project Management	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
Status Report	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
Technical Application using Software	N/A	N/A	N/A	X	X
Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal					
Goal Setting	X	X	X	X	X
Journal/Portfolio	X	X	N/A	X	X
Market Research	X	X	N/A	X	X
Marketing Plan	N/A	X	X	X	X
Campaign Management / Personal Branding	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	X

Source: Syllabi of MKT 325 Course from 2000 - 2014

N/A = Not taught

**TABLE 3:
Skills Applied in each Method**

Dominant Skill	Professional Books	Assessments	Team Projects	Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal
Goal Setting	X	X		X
Self-Analysis	X	X		X
Leadership	X	X	X	X
Time Management	X	X	X	X
Thinking Critically and Creatively	X		X	X
Negotiation / Selling	X		X	X
Writing Effectively	X		X	X
Change Management	X		X	X
Public Speaking	X		X	X
Listening	X		X	X

CONCLUSION

Employers, business schools, and the AACSB have identified the employability skills business students need to succeed in today's competitive environment. These employability skills are often defined as hard and soft skills. Marketing professionals

**TABLE 4
Summary of Student Evaluations to HPPS from 2009 to 2012 (based on 1,200 students)**

Item	Survey Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	The course syllabus clearly stated course objectives, requirements and grading criteria.	4.78	0.48
2	The readings and assignments contributed to my understanding of the subject.	4.56	0.61
3	Exams, projects, papers, etc. were good measures of the course material.	4.75	0.21
4	The instructor provided timely feedback about	4.68	0.79

Item	Survey Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
	my performance in the class.		
5	The instructor clearly presented the subject matter.	4.54	0.59
6	The instructor was well prepared.	4.60	0.53
7	The instructor demonstrated knowledge of the subject matter.	4.56	0.61
8	The instructor was accessible to provide requested help in the subject.	4.55	0.59
9	The instructor was respectful and unbiased when interacting with the students.	4.60	0.63
10	The course contributed to my intellectual growth and/or helped me develop useful skills.	4.64	0.68
11	Overall the instructor was an effective teacher.	4.58	0.58

NOTE: Scale was 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

acquire not only hard skills, but also soft skills throughout their careers. Hard skills are associated with functional areas of expertise such as: database marketing, market research, campaign management, and web marketing. A marketing professional's growth and progression will depend on acquiring and mastering soft skills in order to advance their careers to the levels of Marketing Manager, Brand Manager, Marketing Director, and ultimately, Chief Marketing Officer.

HPPS was developed to close the employability gap for marketing students. The traditional structure of a course was drastically modified so that it mimics the workplace environment students will encounter in Corporate America upon graduation. It lays the foundation of hard and soft skills and uses unique methods to teach these skills. These methods have lift and relevance throughout the students' careers; they consist of reading professional books; conducting assessments at all levels: individual (self and introspective), peer (colleagues and subordinates), instructor (mentor), and management (supervisor and executive); working in teams; and marketing oneself, all of which are critical elements of managing one's career. During the 4-year period where data was available, the average GPA for HPPS was 2.47 on a 4.0 GPA scale, yet it received ratings greater than 4.5 on a 5-point scale on all questions. The course was so successful that approximately 20 percent of the students were not even marketing majors. Student feedback offers one perspective of the course success. HPPS could benefit from employers perspective with respect to campus recruiting of marketing students for internships, full-time and part-time employment.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The Direct Marketing Campaign Applied to a Career Goal project has been well received. HPPS should develop more active learning projects to enhance the students' learning and retention (Bascoul et al., 2013; Jackson, 2012). As the marketing profession evolves, so too will the need for the evolution of topics covered in HPPS. This will require faculty to stay abreast of trends and changes in the industry. HPPS will need to develop new methods to better instill concepts in students. It may leverage the typical test and learn approach used in marketing campaigns. HPPS is a model for bridging the gap between universities curriculum and 'real world' marketing. The outcome will lead to a better-prepared and more employable marketing graduate.

From a research perspective, HPPS offers fertile ground for further study of marketing graduates and their employability post-graduation from various stakeholders. For example:

1. Survey marketing students to assess their perceptions of the skills acquired in HPPS before, during, and post graduation.
2. Survey alumni at various post graduation stages to obtain their feedback on curriculum enhancements and skills marketing graduates will need.
3. Survey employers to identify and prioritize critical employable skills required of marketing professionals at various stages of their careers.
4. Survey employers on the quality of marketing graduates with respect to campus recruiting for internships, full-time and part-time employment.
5. Track the career choices and progression of marketing graduates with respect to their assessments and performance in the HPPS course.

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THE MARKETING BLOG COMPETITION: INTEGRATING EDUCATIONAL BLOGGING AND ANALYTICS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

How should marketing educators teach today's technologically savvy college students the latest knowledge as well as relevant soft and hard skills for employment in a world of Web 2.0? The changing environment requires the development of innovative pedagogical approaches to enhance students' experiential learning. Recent research has focused on the idea of implementing technology and the adoption of educational blogging in the marketing curriculum. This paper outlines a semester-long marketing blog competition, in which students had to (1) create and maintain a marketing blog and (2) apply web analytics to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators. This article offers a detailed discussion of the design and implementation as well as the outcomes based on quantitative and qualitative student feedback.

INTRODUCTION

As marketing educators we are faced with the challenge of equipping students with various professional competencies and preparing them “to be productive employees who can communicate effectively, work well in teams and (...) demonstrate content knowledge” (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009, p. 154). Academics have often been accused of emphasizing marketing theory instead of bridging the gap between theoretical marketing principles and ‘real-world’ practice (de los Santos & Jensen, 1985). Several scholars have declared students being ill-prepared for a career in the marketing profession (Day, 1979; Ostheimer, 1977; Peters, 1980). Others point out that “the lecture format is not the most effective educational delivery mechanism, particularly in marketing” (Helms, Mayo, & Baxter, 2003, p. 18). Active learning methods are alternatively recommended in which students are empowered to think and learn for themselves (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1991). Literature on education and learning advocates, in particular, experiential learning (e.g. Gremler et al., 2000; Navarro, 2008) which refers to an interactive teaching style with new roles for teacher and students (Simpson & Pham, 2007). As employers increasingly expect that graduates have advanced information technology skills, marketing educators have adopted technology and the Internet as

instructional media (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). Furthermore, Henson, Kennett, and Kennedy (2003) note that students who have higher levels of technological orientation are more marketable for employment.

This article presents an innovative approach of teaching students relevant soft and hard skills oriented around blog-writing and the application of web analytics. In this project, students in an online marketing course were required to (1) create and maintain marketing blogs and (2) apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs). The blog project was implemented twice in an online marketing course during a 15-week spring semester in 2011 and 2012. The project aimed to provide an experiential learning experience in online marketing and to enhance students' writing and communication skills, their time management and teamwork skills, while familiarizing them simultaneously with the application of different web technologies and web analytics. As some scholars have argued, blogs are a popular marketing communication tool and new graduates are facing increasing pressure to become familiar with such technologies (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). We expect that students improve their analytical skills during this project as well as become more motivated and engaged as a marketing professional.

This article is organized as follows: The following section reviews relevant literature regarding the concept of experiential learning and the use of technology in the marketing curriculum. In addition, the blogging phenomenon is briefly described. In the following section, the authors discuss in detail the design and implementation of the blog competition. In particular, the individual and group work requirements are highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of the assessment, the grading criteria and the project's benefits which is supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence. The review of the project's effectiveness includes also a comparison of this study's quantitative results with the Kaplan, Piskin & Bol (2010) study. The paper concludes with lessons learned, recommendations for future variations, and a brief conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach whereby students experience "a task or set of tasks, and ultimately learn from their actions" (Neale, Treiblmaier, Henderson, Hunter, Hudson & Murphy, 2009, p. 7). Over the last decade, many university educators have incorporated real-world experiential learning in various disciplines including marketing-related courses, for example: principles of marketing (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp & Mayo, 2000; Drea, Engelland & Singh, 1997; Munoz & Huser, 2008), services marketing (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000), marketing communications (Luck & Chalmers, 2007), and marketing research (Bove & Davies 2009; Bridges, 1999).

Experiential learning theory dates back to Kolb (1976, 1984) who describes the learning process as a four-stage cycle: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. According to Kolb, students actively participate in experiences followed by observation and reflective abstraction (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010; Levin & Davis, 2007). Academic literature has reported various benefits associated with the concept of experiential learning: facilitating critical thinking, integrating theory into practice, improving oral and written communication, and enhancing skills in decision-making, listening, time management, and other soft skills (Garcia & Pontrich, 1996; Gremler et al., 2000; Smart, Kelley & Conant, 1999; Warren, 1997). In addition, students perceive experiential methods, particularly real-world projects, as more effective for their learning (Karns, 2005; Navarro, 2008).

Blogging and the Use of Technology

Research in marketing education has addressed instructional technology from two angles: a broad view that investigates the overall integration of technology in the classroom and its outcomes on teaching and learning and a narrow view that analyses the application of particular Web 2.0 technologies via online activities and projects (Buzzard, Crittenden, Crittenden, & McCarty, 2011). Recently, a special edition in the *Journal of Marketing Education* (Vol. 33, No. 2) reviewed specific examples of technology in the classroom including social media sites such as Twitter (e.g. Lowe and Laffey, 2011; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie 2011), user-generated videos on YouTube (e.g. Payne, Campbell, and Bal, 2011) and virtual worlds such as Second Life (e.g. Halvorson, Ewing & Windisch). A few authors have emphasized the use of blogs in the classroom (e.g., Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010; Levin & Davis, 2007).

Blogging has become a mainstream activity and is now widely used in the corporate world. By the end of 2011, NM Incite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, tracked over 180 million blogs around the world, compared to only 36 million in 2006 (NielsenWire, 2012). While about 65% of bloggers are considered hobbyists (Technorati, 2012), professional blogging becomes more important. For instance, based on an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, there are more than 450,000 people in the United States making their living as bloggers – ranking second after the number of lawyers (Penn, 2009). Corporate blogging exhibits a growing trend as organizations are searching for opportunities to communicate more effectively with internal and external stakeholders (Laudon & Laudon, 2007).

While blogging is gaining popularity in the business environment, the use of blogs as an educational tool still has only received limited attention so far (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). A few studies suggest favorable pedagogical outcomes including enhanced learning and interactivity (Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and student improvements in communication skills, creativity, and self-expression (Huffaker, 2005; Kennedy, 2003). According to Oravec (2002) blogs encourage self-expression and collaboration, which in

turn are reflected in enhanced literacy and critical thinking skills. Kaplan, Piskin & Bol (2010) incorporate educational blogging to enhance students' soft skills, such as written communication, critical thinking, effective presentation and the use of technology. While blogging itself is potentially a powerful tool for marketing education, the activity has to be interconnected with web analytics. That is, students have to learn how to measure the blog's traffic and make decisions to improve the blog's effectiveness. Thus, it is reasonable to extend the scope of the blog activity providing students with an holistic skill set pertaining to *blogging strategy* (e.g., understanding the target audience), *blogging technology* (e.g., tools and platforms), *blogging content and design* (e.g. understanding blog aesthetics, writing compelling and relevant blog posts) and *blogging performance* (e.g. integrating web analytics, search engine optimization and social media).

PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Course Context

The project was implemented twice in an undergraduate course titled *e-Marketing* (also referred to as Internet Marketing, Online Marketing) at a small liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest in the United States. The course is an elective in the undergraduate curriculum for the Marketing concentration. The objective is to introduce students to the Internet and other online and mobile technologies for marketing purposes, in particular the planning, design and execution of marketing strategies and programs. Since technology and the Internet are changing rapidly and new trends have been emerging (e.g. social media marketing, blog marketing, online public relations, etc.), the instructor decided to integrate an innovative approach in the course for building and improving necessary marketing skills: The *Marketing Blog Competition* was comprised of an individual component (blog writing as part of small team of bloggers) as well as a group component (tracking and optimizing the team's blog performance).

The idea of implementing educational blogging originated from an article in the *Journal of Marketing Education* by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) in which they describe the adaption of blogging as part of a Marketing Management course. While the authors focus mainly on soft skills, including written communication and coherent expression, the instructor decided to add a second component, a group competition, in which students had to apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs). Academic literature suggests that students learn more through competitive projects (Rundle-Thiele & Kuhn, 2008; Stutts & West, 2003).

Project design

As part of this course teams of three students set up a marketing blog on the platform *Blogger.com* and posted several blog entries during the semester. Project requirements

and instructions to set up a blog were provided in the syllabus posted on Sakai, the university's course management system (CMS) and discussed during the first day of class. Students were advised to use the Blogger platform (see Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010), instead of other blogging websites such as WordPress, for several reasons. First, the university uses Google's Apps for Education which includes the free platform Blogger, i.e. hosting is free. Since students already have a Google account, the sign-up process is relatively easy and convenient. WordPress, however, requires paid web hosting and a domain name. Second, Blogger provides a user-friendly interface and a great variety of customization, e.g. a template designer. While WordPress is more customizable, the majority of students did not have any prior blogging experience; thus Blogger appeared to be the better choice for beginners. Third, since Blogger is a Google product, it integrates seamlessly with other Google products such as Google Analytics.

After signing up an account, each team had to create a URL and blog name. Students needed to consider that the name could not be changed and that the URL would be permanent. Blog posts were allowed on any topic that was relevant to marketing and, in particular, online marketing. The syllabus included the following examples: advertising campaigns, TV commercials, new products, company acquisitions, a service experience, or changes in personal consumption preferences; however students were allowed to make their own suggestions. In other words, virtually any topic did fit as long it exhibited a link to marketing theory or practice (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010). In addition, each student was required to set up an account on *Google Reader*, a news reader, to manage blog subscriptions of all group blogs as well as five required marketing blogs (SearchEngineWatch, The Social Media Marketing Blog, Marketing Pilgrim, Online Marketing Blog and ProBlogger). Links to those blogs had to be added on each team's own blog site as well. In addition, teams were required to create an introductory post, which included a hyperlink to an outside resource (e.g. the University) and a second introductory post that explained the purpose of the blog, being a part of this course project. The *purpose* was twofold: First, students had to follow and read professional marketing blogs enhancing their marketing knowledge and critical thinking skills. Secondly, following each other blogs in class was supposed to engage students more meaningfully in this project.

Individual work requirements

Each student had to individually post a minimum of one blog entry every two weeks throughout the semester. The purpose was both to ensure a minimum number of writing assignments for the semester and to maintain a balance with other class projects and assignments. The timeframe also seemed appropriate to compare blogging frequency among teams. That is, teams were supposed to develop a schedule that would demonstrate a strategic approach of frequent updates. In addition to writing blog entries, everyone was required to comment at least twice on blog postings from the 'required blogs' as well as blog postings submitted by classmates, with thoughtful responses to the

posted blog entries. Each student was also responsible for responding to the comments posted by classmates (and others who may have commented). Thus, there were a number of occasions for students to apply their skills of written communication and coherent expression.

Group competition

The second project component dealt with monitoring and improving blog performance. Each group had to create an account on *Google Analytics* to analyze their blog traffic over the semester. Students had to apply textbook and classroom material such as website and blog design, search engine optimization (SEO), web analytics, etc. For example, teams had to identify and monitor key metrics and then, on a weekly basis, submit Google Analytics reports (both in Excel and pdf). At the end of the semester, all teams had to prepare a presentation summarizing their blog strategy and content, the creativity of their blog design (that is, the number/type of widgets and plugins for sharing content on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and the overall performance based on various KPIs such as pageviews, visits, unique visitors, average time on site, keywords and referrals. To make the project even more compelling, the instructor created a competition. The team with the most successful blog at the end of the semester, based on the evaluation of the instructor and two external judges, received a certificate of accomplishment and a financial award (gift cards to be redeemed at the bookstore) from the Dean of the School of Business.

PROJECT ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Blogs have unique characteristics that differentiate them from traditional communication media or other online counterparts (Park, Ahn, & Kim, 2010). At the beginning of the project, students were told that blog writing would be different from homework because all posts would become public and accessible online (Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010). Therefore, it was expected that students had to post well-structured arguments that clearly explain an issue relevant to marketing and which were in compliance with grammatical and spelling rules. Students were graded individually on:

- The quality of the posts (relevance of the entry to marketing, writing style, etc.),
- The frequency of the posts,
- The links provided within the posts,
- Presentation of material in their blog,
- Quality of commenting (responses to others, etc.).

Group grades were determined on overall blog performance which consisted of five criteria:

- **Blog structure:** choice of blog URL, use of meta tags, information about blog contributors, display of “about blog”, use of widgets and plugins (e.g. “subscribe to” button, buttons to share on Facebook and Twitter, Facebook plugin),

- **Blog design:** overall layout of blog, aesthetics of blog site, use of background and colors, font type/size;
- **Blog strategy:** clarity of blog subjects, identified target audience, reliable frequency of blog posts, team contributions, integration with Facebook page (if available);
- **Blog content:** consistency of blog posts with blog strategy, marketing relevance of blog posts, number of spelling and writing errors, quantity and quality of links and videos incorporated in each blog post;
- **KPIs and blog analytics:**
 - *Based on Blogger Stats:* number of followers, total pageviews, highest number of pageviews in a month, highest pageviews per blog topic, referrals from Facebook and Google.com;
 - *Based on Google Analytics:* visits since blog launch, average visits per day, total pageviews, unique visitors, average time on site, bounce rate, loyalty (percentage of 1 time visitors versus return visitors, traffic from search engines and referring sites, most popular keywords).

Appendix 1 illustrates the teams’ performance data for an exemplary course.

In 2011, the data shows that team 4 created the most successful blog over the semester. One of the judges summarized the performance based on the content strategy and the design: “Good interesting concept that I want/need to know more about. Good information. Worth reading. [...] Simple design but it communicates and integrates well with the theme of the blog.” The team achieved by far the highest number of total pageviews (according to statistics both from Blogger and Google Analytics), the highest number of pageviews per blog topic and the most referrals from Google.com. Based on the data from Google Analytics, the team also had the highest number of unique visitors; more than three times compared to the next team (749 vs. 250). Bounce rates were mostly quite high across all teams (more than 60%). This was expected since the bounce rate is higher in general for blogs. Teams 5 and 6 are showing lower bounce rates; however, those teams did not manage to track data for the whole semester. Teams 1 and 4 also achieved to gain visits via popular keywords on search engines. For example, one student of team 4 was posting a story titled “Duped by a Teacup Pig” discussing how the website Koofers, a college study network, was using a picture of a teacup pig in miniature rain boots on Facebook to increase traffic. The keyword ‘teacup pig’ then led to 23 visits to the team’s blog story. In conclusion, the panel of judges agreed that team 4 was the winner of this blog competition.

In 2012 the data shows that also one team (Your Mobile Life) was most successful with 2,764 pageviews (Blogger Stats) and 579 unique visitors (Google Analytics). In addition to an outstanding frequency of blog posts, one the judges commented on the quality of the blog content. For example, according to the first judge, “The YML design is simple,

but the content is what draws me in. The YML content is readable, interesting and consistent. Plus, it addresses the purpose of the blog.” The second judge commented also in favor, saying: “Great template – easy to follow posts, and easy shares for each blog post. I like the one on making Mom’s life easier and app suggestions for her phone!”

In both years, some teams went beyond the project requirements and created also Facebook pages and Twitter accounts which linked back to their blog. Results show that those teams that actively promoted their blog through Facebook (i.e., increasing the number of fans) achieved to get more referrals through social media, thus increasing the overall traffic to their blog. Since this was not a required component of the project, it illustrates how (at least some) students were more engaged in this project. This may have been due to the competitive nature of this project.

PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT FEEDBACK

Besides formal course evaluations a short online survey (based on Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010) was conducted at the end of the semester to determine student satisfaction. Qualitative responses indicate that the course blog competition has been extremely successful (see TABLE 1).

TABLE 1

Student Feedback

Question: What factors attracted you to the blog project? What did you like or enjoy?	
Answers, spring 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I liked how it was different than any other project I have done in college. It was interactive and really forced me to learn and apply the information in class to our client project. • I enjoyed the hands on experience rather than listening to a lecture. I enjoyed learning how to blog and implementing SEO strategies.
Answers, spring 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I enjoyed getting to work with a real team. I also liked that all of my effort translated into direct results among students and other peers that were reading the blogs. Along with that, I think that it was cool that we could track results directly (using Analytics and Blogger stats). Instead of just relying on feedback from a person, we had responses that used actual formulas to deliver results that were worthwhile.
Question: How did your participation in the blog project improve your knowledge about online marketing?	
Answers, spring 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By using Google Analytics and [blog] marketing, I learned how to better promote myself and whatever I am engaged in the future. This exponentially improved my knowledge about online marketing, considering I knew nothing about online marketing. • It improved my knowledge of SEO and how to use meta-tags in html. I really enjoyed learning how to implement Google Analytics and how to analyze it. Google Analytics was my favorite part!
Answers, spring 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was able to get a full grasp on SEO and practices to ensure that our website or platform is something that people are actually seeking. [...] One other

thing that I got to learn was the importance of consistency and the use of strong content. Content is gold when it comes to online marketing – and we definitely found out how valuable a good blog post was.

- There are a lot of technical skills that one doesn't get from simply reading about in a textbook. The hands on experience really helped me with the SEO and got comfortable with websites like Blogger.
-

As the feedback in both semesters indicate, students liked the hands-on experience, the flexibility to choose their own topics, the ability to design the blog's layout and the opportunity to learn and apply SEO tactics to increase their traffic. Based on increased knowledge of online marketing, the active application of website analytics and the reflection of writing relevant content for a target audience, students also described that they felt better prepared for employment after graduation.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS

In addition to the qualitative study, a quantitative approach was applied to measure the perceived effectiveness of the project in achieving experiential learning, improvement of soft skills and technology integration (see also Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010). Enhancing the blogging project of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) we assume that our enhancement has a significant impact on the students' blogging experience and goes beyond the evaluations of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010)'s students. Thus, our approach is twofold: Using the items suggested by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) we first check if the evaluations were better than nonneutral, i.e. significantly different from the midpoint 3. This step is a replication of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010)'s work. In the second step we compare our results to their previous work in order to examine if our project set up results in a significant difference. Furthermore, in order to avoid "single shot results" (Evanschitzky, Baumgarth, Hubbard, & Armstrong, 2007, p. 417), our project was part of the marketing education in two different student classes, one in 2011 and the other in 2012.

We used 41 items as suggested by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) based on prior research (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007). The item "Compared to working on a team project, this project was more interesting" was excluded in our survey because students were asked to fill their blogs as a group rather than individually. Students were asked to rate these statements on 5-point Likert-type scales, with 1 being 'I completely disagree' and 5 representing 'I completely agree'. As we used the same questionnaire in both surveys, the data was aggregated for reliability analysis (n = 44). Cronbach's alpha was .97, which is satisfactorily. A summary of the results is presented in TABLE 2.

TABLE 2

Overall evaluation of the marketing blog projects

		Class 2011		Class 2012	
		M	SD	M	SD
1.	This project should be assigned to future classes.	4.04***	.95	4.25***	.91
2.	Having instructor feedback was a positive aspect of this project.	4.21***	.93	4.00***	.97
3.	This project has enhanced my awareness of marketing.	4.08***	.93	4.00***	.97
4.	This project declines the tendency to do a copy-and-paste assignment.	3.54**	.88	4.05***	.95
5.	This project was one of the best parts of this course.	3.58**	.93	3.85**	1.04
6.	This project enhanced my understanding of marketing activities.	3.96***	.69	3.90***	.91
7.	This project enhances the skills to carry on unaided research.	3.58**	.83	4.10***	1.02
8.	As a learning experience, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture.	4.29***	.81	4.35***	.75
9.	Compared to writing a term paper, this project was more interesting.	4.63***	.71	4.35***	.99
10.	This project improved my overall knowledge of marketing.	4.00***	1.06	3.90***	1.02
11.	This project helped me to realize practical applications of marketing theory.	3.71***	.95	3.95***	1.0
12.	This project increased my attention to the course in general.	3.96***	1.12	3.70**	1.08
13.	This project increased my overall satisfaction with the course.	4.00***	.93	3.70**	1.03
14.	Incorporating blogs into a project is an efficient method in general.	4.00***	.98	4.10***	.97
15.	This project enhances general observation skills.	3.58*	1.06	3.70**	.98
16.	I found having Web wanderers read my work very exciting.	3.54*	1.18	3.80**	1.15
17.	I believe that using Web technologies in a project is enjoyable.	4.29***	.91	4.25***	.97
18.	This project helped me to gain a wider perspective of marketing.	3.88***	1.08	4.05***	.95
19.	Incorporating blogs into a project is an effective method in general.	3.88***	.99	4.00***	.92
20.	Having other students read my work was a positive aspect of this project.	3.71**	1.08	4.00***	1.03
21.	This project enhances self-expression skills.	4.08***	.97	4.15***	1.09
22.	As a learning experience, this project was more productive than listening to a lecture.	4.08***	1.10	4.35***	1.04
23.	This project develops career skills.	4.00***	.93	4.35***	.93
24.	Compared to listening to a lecture, this project has motivated me to study harder for the course.	3.67**	1.01	3.70**	1.13
25.	Having peer feedback was a positive aspect of this project.	3.75***	.94	3.80**	1.06
26.	I did research on various sources to perform better on	3.46	1.22	3.85***	.99

27.	this project. This project has enabled me to make better use of class time.	3.50*	1.02	3.75**	.91
28.	This project enhances writing communication skills.	3.79**	1.10	3.90***	.97
29.	This project has increased my self-confidence.	3.38	1.10	3.40	1.0
30.	I believe the instructor better knew me throughout the project.	3.58*	1.18	3.40	1.19
31.	This project enhances the skills for proper use of language.	3.58*	1.14	3.80**	1.06
32.	This project gave me the opportunity to reach the instructor beyond class hours.	3.75***	.94	3.25	.97
33.	This project helped me to feel myself valuable.	3.54*	.98	3.60*	1.05
34.	I put a great deal of effort into this project.	3.75**	1.19	3.75**	1.02
35.	I put the knowledge I gained from this project to use in other courses.	3.92***	1.06	3.85**	1.14
36.	I had the opportunity to integrate my knowledge from other courses into this project.	4.00***	.72	3.80***	.95
37.	This project helped me to better know my classmates.	3.88***	.95	4.20***	.89
38.	I improved my skills of using web technologies throughout the project.	4.04***	1.16	4.20***	.89
39.	This project increases competitiveness between students.	3.79***	.98	4.30***	.80
40.	Because of this project. I was unable to put enough effort on other courses.	2.67	1.49	2.50	1.19
41.	The learning experience provided by this project was not worth the effort.	2.92	1.50	2.20***	.95

TABLE 2 compared the mean score of each item to the indifferent midpoint of the scale. Thus, any significant difference from the midpoint 3 implies a nonneutral opinion. One-sample t-tests show that both in the 2011 and 2012 sample four items were not significant ($p > .05$). While only item 29 and item 40 are not significant in both samples, all item means in both data sets are above the midpoint 3. The last two items are reversely coded, thus the means are smaller than 3. As TABLE 2 illustrates, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture ($M_{2011}=4.29^{***}$ vs. $M_{2012}=4.35^{***}$) and more interesting compared to writing a term paper ($M_{2011}=4.63^{***}$ vs. $M_{2012}=4.35^{***}$). Answers to item 4 differ quite strongly among both student cohorts. The 2011 class perceived less that the project declines the tendency to do a copy-and-paste assignment compared to the 2012 class. Furthermore, item 15 appears to have the least relevance in both student cohorts, that is, blogging does only provide limited opportunity to enhance general observation skills. Finally, results of item 29 are non-significant. Thus, we cannot conclude that the blog project contributed to increase students' self-confidence. This however contradicts at least some of the qualitative feedback. Thus, more research is needed to assess the relationship between blogging and students' self-confidence.

LESSONS LEARNED

The blog competition was a successful innovative experiential learning activity, supporting existing literature (e.g. Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010) regarding positive outcomes of educational blogging. However, the instructor noted several limitations and challenges that varied across both student cohorts. In the following some critical issues are addressed that provide room for future improvements.

Choice of Topics

Students were free to choose among a number of topics listed in the syllabus. The only requirement was that each blog had to be marketing-relevant. While most teams did comply with the requirement, the instructor experienced twice some challenges, in particular, with blogs related to beer and breweries. In both cases, the blog focused on the description of beers, restaurants' happy hour, the art of beer-making, etc. and less on the marketing efforts of beer companies. Even though the choice of topic enhanced students' motivations to blog, the instructor had to deduct points as these blogs missed the purpose of the assignment. The question arises, if instructors should further narrow down the topics or instead allow marketing-unrelated topics (e.g. food, fitness, etc.).

Training of Blogging Skills

One obstacle of the blog project relates to the students' experience with blogging. While Blogger is a user-friendly platform to set up a blog, even for beginners, instructors have to teach some basic skills. The lead author faced the challenge that the content of blogging was planned to be covered during the middle of the semester, after other topics such as SEM, SEO, and Email Marketing. However, students felt somewhat lost at the beginning of the project. To "jumpstart" students' blogging skills, the instructor shared several video tutorials and guidelines on successful blogging. Furthermore, a professional blogger was invited as guest speaker who shared several examples and best practices. After year 1 the instructor decided to revise the class schedule and spend more class time at the beginning of the project to cover the basics of blogging. Overall, the authors conclude that instructors can improve the student experience by (1) inviting a professional blogger as guest speaker and (2) use class time regularly to mentor student teams.

Lack of Participation and Dedication

Students in both years were engaged in two semester-long projects. Besides the blogging competition each team also participated in the Google Online Marketing Challenge (Tuzovic, Wetsch, & Murphy, 2011). Both projects are demanding exercises that require students to spend considerable time and effort. With regard to the blog competition the instructor noted a lack of participation (i.e., infrequent blog posts) even though the requirements (i.e., minimum number of blog posts) were stated in the syllabus. Some students commented on this behavior at the end of the semester, for example: "Require

stricter regulations on when to blog. Some groups lacked enough blogs”; Make sure that everybody HAS to blog something every week, thereby forcing them to participate”; “Require students to construct a schedule for blog posts”. As a result of the lack of individual blog posts the instructor also experienced difficulties in assigning the individual grade. As Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) rightfully conclude, the lack of dedication can lead to a complete failure of the project. Thus, it is critical to increase and/or maintain student motivations in the blog project. One important task for the instructor is to read and review blog posts continuously and leave comments and/or questions that would engage students further in critical thinking and communication (e.g. Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010).

Written Rubrics for Assessment

As described earlier the grading was based on several factors. However, no written rubrics were used. For future applications, grading rubrics would appear to be an essential guide (Kaplan et al. 2010). This can be used to communicate expectations more clearly to students at the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, future research may want to compare the effectiveness of this project by comparing students’ analytical and communication skills, e.g. in longitudinal studies or across sections (i.e. one section using the blog competition versus one without). We did not control for final grades, thus we cannot tell objectively how performance may have varied.

Variations of the Project

This project was based on individual and team performance. Kaplan et al. (2010) discussed blog teams and a weekly competition as a possible variation of their project. One student in class suggested conducting the blog competition as a single assignment because it was difficult to coordinate with team members. This is a valid complaint; however, collaboration is a critical skill in the business environment. Some students this year also made interesting suggestions. For instance, variations may include sponsored blogs by businesses or project competition with other schools.

Both variants while quite thought-provoking may add new challenges such as finding potential partner institutions with similar class settings, harmonizing assessment and grading criteria, recruiting open-minded businesses, dealing with client restrictions of blog topics and content.

CONCLUSION

Overall, students seemed to have enjoyed this real-life project and have gained important learning outcomes of reflective and analytical thinking, written and oral communication, self-directed learning, teamwork dynamics, and the use of cutting-edge technology. In both semesters, a vast majority agreed or completely agreed that they improved their skills of using web technologies throughout the project, and that the project increased

their attention to the course in general. Most students further agreed or completely agreed that, as a learning experience, the project was more productive than listening to a lecture. In summary, this project demonstrates how marketing blogging can be integrated with web analytics as an innovative pedagogical tool to build and enhance students' soft skills and hard skills for real-world business scenarios in the context of online marketing.

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Appendix 1
Comparison of student teams' blog performance

<i>Blog Team</i>	<i>Blog 1</i>	<i>Blog 2</i>	<i>Blog 3</i>	<i>Blog 4</i>	<i>Blog 5</i>	<i>Blog 6</i>	<i>Blog 7</i>	<i>Blog 8</i>
Blog Name	Public Propaganda	Mobile Mkt and Tech.	Dream Team Analytics	Surviving Social Media Jungle	CHEERS!	Soft Drinks and Beauty Products	Selling Point: Commercial Explorers	They shoot, They score
Blogger Stats	13	10	9	11	9	9	8	8
Number of followers	1395	433	477	2,142	764	555	430	259
Total pageviews	598	138	187	1,253	423	192	164	22
Highest number of pageviews in a month	96	21	25	265	113	19	63	22
Highest pageviews per blog topic	302	1	63	17	217	13	59	60
Referrals from Facebook	58	32	29	627	18	47	45	59
Referrals from Google.com								
Google Analytics Stats	648	219	290	1,119	166	123	318	189
Visits since beginning	1,339	508	689	1,527	481	537	713	525
Total pageviews	250	56	64	749	95	42	118	86
Unique visitors	03:15	03:00	04:07	01:04	01:57	06:12	05:16	02:58
Avg time on site	63%	65%	60%	68%	51%	21%	65%	69%
Bounce rate	37%	25%	22%	67%	57%	34%	37%	44%
Loyalty: 1 times (%)	6%	11%	1%	5%	0%	2%	6%	8%
Traffic search engines	75%	66%	96%	78%	93%	87%	87%	69%
Traffic referring sites	37 visits via 26 keywords	25 visits via 11 keywords	4 visits via 6 keywords	59 visits via 23 keywords	0 visits	3 visits via 3 keywords	21 visits via 10 keywords	15 visits via 10 keywords

