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The trials and triumphs of running cross-year experiential modules: blending theory and practice to advance student professional development and academic practice.

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The trials and triumphs of running cross-year experiential modules: Blending theory and practice to advance student professional development and academic practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to evaluate the impact of two innovative cross-year experiential modules operated jointly between undergraduate Stages 3 and 4 on the professional development of students and the advancement of academic practice at Robert Gordon University in Scotland. Drawing upon pedagogy, including active and experiential learning and qualitative data collected from Stage 3 and 4 student focus groups and academic staff interviews, this paper aims to analyse the opportunities and challenges presented by cross-year experiential modules in relation to student engagement and professional development, and lessons learnt with implications on academic practice. These modules, designed to simulate a *real-world Digital Marketing Agency*, are a distinctive part of the BA (Hons) Digital Marketing course. They provide collaborative learning problem-solving opportunities through cross-year group work involving Stage 4 students taking on leadership roles in strategic planning over Stage 3 students, in operational roles, who develop related campaign materials in response to the requirements of *live* clients. This is reflected in the application of two distinct sets of criteria to assess the students' coursework in accordance with stage-specific learning outcomes. Each group is supported by an academic and industry mentor for the duration of the modules.

Keywords: experiential learning, peer-led collaborative learning, digital marketing education, professional development, advancement of academic practice

Introduction

Digital marketing practice has a history of constant evolution (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015). The continuous emergence of new media and technological advances has transformed organisational practice, often making it challenging for practitioners to keep up to date and in turn fuelling the digital skills shortage (Finch et al., 2013). To help bridge this skills gap, Robert Gordon University's School of Creative and Cultural Business launched an innovative *Authentic, Peer-led, Collaborative, Experiential Learning* (APCEL) project in 2022, also known as the *Digital Marketing Agency*, providing students with the opportunity to become part of a fast-paced *live* industry setting and experience industry opportunities and challenges first-hand. The Digital Marketing Agency (Stage 3) and Digital Marketing Management (Stage 4) modules are a distinctive part of the BA (Hons) Digital Marketing programme, designed to simulate a *real-world digital marketing agency* whereby Stage 3 (junior) and Stage 4 (senior) students work collaboratively to *live* client briefs. The modules' authentic and experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984) develops learners' working knowledge and skills, enabling the module content to maintain relevancy in a fast-moving subject field.

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

As part of the APCEL project, senior students assume a significant degree of responsibility for the leadership of their team and coach junior students to deliver campaign materials in response to their clients' requirements. In the process, senior students develop working knowledge and critical understanding of leadership skills, whilst junior students hone their technical and operational skills. These modules show that by facilitating *live* client interactions, higher education practitioners can enable students to develop meta-skills (Skills Development Scotland [SDS], n.d.), such as adaptability and collaboration; skills that are important to achieve graduate-level employability.

This article examines the key themes of the impact of experiential learning on students' professional and skills development, introduces the APCEL model of teaching delivery, and, using an interpretivist qualitative methodology, evaluates the trials and triumphs of delivering cross-year, live-client, experiential modules from the perspectives of both staff and students, concluding with key lessons learned, the identification of future enhancements and discussion of the applicability of APCEL cross-year modules in other subject fields.

This research study aims to evaluate the impact of two innovative cross-year experiential modules operated jointly between undergraduate Stages 3 and 4 on the professional development of students and the advancement of academic practice. As the students graduate and transition to professional practice, it would be beneficial to gain an insight into the impact APCEL cross-year delivery might have had on their career development, the advancement of academic practice and any challenges and opportunities it has presented to help inform future module enhancements. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does experiential learning prepare our students for digital marketing careers?

RQ2: To what extent does experiential learning alter staff and students' perception of their own professional practice?

RQ3 – What are the challenges and opportunities of cross-year collaborative learning?

Literature review

Experiential learning and meta-skills development in digital marketing education

Digital marketing practice is synonymous with constant evolution (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015). The continuous emergence of new media and technological advances has transformed organisational practice, making it harder for practitioners to keep up to date and essential for educators to provide innovative learning environments that develop students' readiness for future careers (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2020). Yet, past studies have reported an emerging gap between digital marketing education and industry needs and emphasised the criticality of balancing the development of knowledge and skills in learners (Finch et al., 2013). In recent years, beyond subject-specific and technical skills, scholars have also highlighted the importance of students cultivating transferable meta-skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, communication, leadership and problem-solving (Rohm et al., 2021). This theory is central to national skills body SDS's *Meta-skills Progression Framework*. SDS (n.d.) created this framework in collaboration with practitioners, to help educators facilitate opportunities for learners to develop meta- or higher-order skills in the classroom in preparation for their future careers. Similarly, the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2023)

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

identifies the top ten current and future skills needed to secure graduate employment. For consistency these broad employability focused skills, often referred to by others as “soft skills” (Ewing & Ewing, 2017) will be referred to as *meta-skills* in this study.

The development of meta-skills, such as critical thinking, tends to be associated with active and experiential learning techniques (Ye et al., 2021). Kolb (1984) defined the experiential learning model as the process of learning through experience and reflection. Although Zahay et al. (2022) argue that this model is not without challenges, as it requires more preparation from educators and the ability to handle less comfortable teaching experiences, it is also highly relevant to digital marketing education as it enables students to develop their skills by applying theoretical concepts to *real-world* scenarios and bridge the skills gap with industry (Goldie et al., 2023). The design of the APCEL modules draws from experiential learning and meta-skills to provide students with the opportunity to integrate a fast-paced industry setting, collaborate with peers and *live* clients, and complete an authentic assessment in response to a *real-world* problem. These modules play a critical part in enabling students to build on existing subject-specific skills and engage in meta-skills and professional development as they build rapport with their allocated clients and undertake field visits to their places of work to capture original content for their marketing campaigns. However, it would be beneficial to gain an insight into the students’ perspective on the impact this experiential learning model of delivery might have had on their professional development.

Experiential learning and the advancement of academic practice

The APCEL modules aim to provide students with an opportunity to apply underpinning digital marketing theory and develop related practical working knowledge through the process of operating and leading their own *Digital Marketing Agency*. Consequently, the delivery model is designed to be student led. To facilitate this, students are allocated to groups and provided with regular support in the form of mentor meetings from both an Academic Mentor (AM) and an Industry Mentor (IM). The IM is a representative from their allocated client organisation. Student groups meet with their AMs weekly and with their IMs fortnightly. These student-led meetings allow learners to discuss their progress and next steps as well as receive feedback and guidance on their work. This teaching delivery model is grounded in cognitive constructivism, a theory which puts the onus on learners to create understanding (Stewart, 2021) and provides educators with active and experiential learning techniques that enable students to apply theoretical concepts to *real-world* situations (Zahay et. al, 2022). The APCEL model has implications on the role of the AMs and the advancement of their academic practice, as it calls for an approach to teaching that is less transmissive, more developmental, and more interactive (Pratt & Collins, 2000). It also requires key liaison with industry partners to identify suitable client organisations for the duration of the modules. Heinrich et al. (2021) state that educators must provide student teams with adequate coaching and mentorship to effectively deliver experiential learning projects; this is reflected in the naming convention for the lecturing team (i.e. AMs). For these reasons, AMs are required to create and seek opportunities to maintain their subject-specific knowledge and engagement with industry while fostering a safe learning environment that allows them to build trust and ask students questions that prompt reflection, empower them to set their own team goals and guide them through to the completion of their projects (van der Baan et al., 2022).

As well as coaching and mentoring, the AM role is to facilitate learning by balancing the needs of students, as they engage in experiential learning, with the expectations of IMs, who anticipate a return on their time investment in the projects (Rohm et al., 2021). Therefore, they must be prepared to manage challenging teaching situations that tend to impact work-integrated learning should the needs of students, live clients

and the university be misaligned (Ajjawi et al., 2020) or might emerge from the simultaneous implementation of authentic assessment in APCEL at two different course stages with distinct learning outcomes.

Cross-year peer-led collaborative learning

APCEL provides students with authentic assessment opportunities that enable them to gain first-hand experience of collaborating with *live* clients to solve a *real-world* challenge they are facing. This theory is supported by Ewing and Ewing (2017), who argue that learning environments designed to simulate social interactions in a corporate context and enable the provision of feedback on relevant technical and meta-skills help prepare students for their transition into industry, making them *work-ready*. Additionally, APCEL fosters peer-led collaboration as Digital Marketing Management (senior) students assume a leadership role whilst working closely with Digital Marketing Agency (junior) students in response to their clients' business needs. Through this experiential learning process, senior students develop practical working knowledge and critical understanding of meta-skills, such as critical thinking and leadership, required to manage a project effectively, and junior students hone their technical and operational skills. There are what Blumenfeld et. al (2006) refer to as motivational benefits to collaborative learning. As students get to construct knowledge in a social context, they can also face challenges, which might hinder the learning process and task completion (Jarvela et. al, 2010). Although some of these challenges were alleviated by the effective implementation of technological tools such as Microsoft Teams to facilitate communications between students and with AMs and IMs (Connon & Pirie, 2022), others required further input from the AMs. For instance, helping senior and junior students build their self-confidence and gain a solid understanding of their respective roles, whilst working on a shared project but against two distinct sets of criteria to assess their coursework in accordance with stage-specific learning outcomes. Another challenge related to balancing the needs of multiple key stakeholders (i.e. university, students, and clients) whilst consistently providing formative feedback throughout the duration of the modules.

APCEL fosters *real-world* learning opportunities for students, yet there is limited literature evaluating the merits of cross-year peer-led collaborative learning and assessment, other than tutoring, in enhancing students' professional development and the advancement of academic practice (Sloman & Thompson, 2010; Hum et al., 2014).

Methodology

Despite extensive literature on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Heinrich et al., 2021; Goldie et al., 2023), authentic assessment (Ewing & Ewing, 2017; Ajjawi et al., 2020) and peer tutoring (Sloman & Thompson, 2010; Hum et al., 2014), cross-year collaborative projects have received limited investigation. Addressing this gap, the research takes an exploratory and flexible approach, that is interpretivist and inductive, building on the literature to identify patterns and theories (Patton, 2002). A qualitative approach was therefore relevant for the study (Bryman et al., 2021), specifically the use of in-depth focus groups and interviews with students and staff respectively (Kvale, 1994).

A purposive non-probability approach was used to identify an appropriate sample, i.e. anyone who could enlighten the discussion purposively and was affected by the topic of the investigation can be selected (Honigman, 1982). As such three groups of individuals were identified from within Robert Gordon University's Digital Marketing delivery: *Current students* (CS), *Graduated students* (GS) and *Academic*

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

Mentors (AM). This led to a total of 15 participants, three AMs, six CSs and six GSs, with two mini focus groups being conducted for each student grouping and three individual interviews with staff. CSs had completed one cycle of delivery of APCEL, i.e. they had functioned in the junior roles of the agency modules and are now in their final year of study. GSs are now graduates in employment and had completed two cycles of APCEL, whilst AMs had delivered on the modules. AMs had acted as module coordinators, either of the junior or final stage module, one of whom is also the programme leader for the BA (Hons) Digital Marketing. It is at this stage that the research should address potential issues of bias, with two of the authors, Vickers and Reid being AMs. Drawing on the work of Elias (1939, 1956, 1987) and Turner and Pirie (2016) around the problems of ‘involvement and detachment’, the team identified a reflexive approach to capture the rich personal data of the AMs whilst maintaining academic rigour, namely that the data collection and analysis was conducted by the second author: Pirie. Although known to the students, Pirie was not involved in the modules’ delivery and as such was able to ask probing questions with the respondents in a safe manner and with no pre-conceived notions of the outcomes, or personal investment (Waddington, 1997). Additionally, prior to the primary data collection phase, the research team sought guidance, and received approval, from the School’s Research Ethics panel and ensured that all internal processes in accordance with RGU’s Research, Governance and Ethics policies were met (Robert Gordon University [RGU], 2023).

The interviews and focus groups were designed to investigate the Research Questions developed from the literature, and thusly questions formed broadly around the following areas: the respondents’ experiences of APCEL, the perceived benefits and challenges of it, and reflections on APCEL’s impact on their personal practice. The data collection was conducted on Microsoft Teams, thematic coding of the transcriptions followed, allowing for a structured approach to the evaluation of the qualitative data (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995).

Findings and discussion

The following discussions evaluate the ‘trials and triumphs’ of delivering APCEL modules in a cross-year student project, by investigating the staff and students’ perspectives relating to each of the three Research Questions outlined in the Literature review.

How experiential learning prepares students for careers as digital marketers

Staff and students alike acknowledged that the fundamental tenet of APCEL is to refine technical subject specific skills, while also developing broader meta-skills (Goldie et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2021). Staff most consistently cited resilience, flexibility, leadership, teamwork, and communication as distinct meta-skills developed during the project. The acquisition of higher-order thinking meta-skills such as creative problem-solving and intellectual curiosity also arose from staff members. Academic Mentor AM2 argued that “all these kind of meta-skills around curiosity, creativity, and being accountable for what they [the students] suggest for the clients and also kind of coaching is part of the process.” Students particularly emphasised the development of leadership and teamwork meta-skills. According to Graduate Student GS4, “that’s the whole point of being a leader, you’ve got to take control.” While Current Student CS5 thought that “it was more things like the teamwork” that they developed.

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

This was not to suggest that the modules did not offer students the opportunity to enhance their digital-marketing-specific skills, but that this was secondary to the purpose of the module as highlighted by AM1:

Whilst it's an opportunity to put into practice and refine what they've already learned, it's most importantly an opportunity to develop those key skills like communication, not only with their peers, but with their client as well, developing leadership and flexibility.

Leadership was highlighted by the students, who expressed that their autonomy to make decisions for *real clients*, whilst daunting, was beneficial both in the development of their own skills and for future career prospects. GS1 thought that "when you are put in a leadership position it gives you that authority and responsibility to be like, OK this is actually how real life will work." This was reflected in the staffs' perceptions of the value of APCEL with AM3 describing it as "one of the things that a lot of the students don't realise they're doing, but it's going to have huge benefits to them in their career ... because it's authentic learning."

It became apparent that the senior students soon took on mentorship / coaching roles in relation to the junior students and to the benefit of each group. Junior students explained that they found they could reach out to the senior students for advice that they may have felt uncomfortable asking their academic or industry mentors for. CS4 "felt really comfortable [*sic*], even with the fourth years, if we had any questions there was like, no dumb question, you know, you could ask anything" and CS6 recognised that "having someone that's done it already" was of benefit beyond the confines of the specific APCEL project, helping quell fears in other modules. The seniors took great pride, and ownership of being the *leaders* and the resultant responsibility to *look out* for their junior counterparts. GS5 stated that:

The pressure that we felt in third year was nothing compared to fourth year when you are responsible for someone else's, journey; someone else's like coursework it is a big deal because you want to do well, and you don't want them to fail.

Although not the focus of the study, this cross-year mentorship component of APCEL was seen as very beneficial to incoming articulating students, not only for the mentorship already noted, but as a way to integrate with the University and their peers. CS4 found working with clients "quite overwhelming, especially coming in from college ... but there was a lot of support from like the fourth years."

The authenticity of the assessment, and the *realness* of the agency setting, created a positive pressure on the students that in hindsight they reflected upon as a critical factor in preparing them for the workplace or helping them feel *work-ready* (Ewing & Ewing, 2017). GS4 was able to use these modules as evidence of their managerial skills in the context of a job interview. Additionally, GS2 really liked:

The fact that we were working like live with clients having meetings and so on, which is kind of what I'm doing right now [*sic*] for my job. So, I think that it was really transferable to a normal digital marketing agency.

Students and staff both commented on the "safe" nature of the modules in that it allowed students to learn in an authentic scenario, but with the ability to make mistakes that may not be as accepted in industry. GS5 recognised that "leadership isn't just all about doing, but it's actually like allowing third years to make mistakes and do their own thing." Staff also reflected upon their own student experience at university and how the APCEL approach differs. AM3 reflected on their experience as a student:

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

For my generation, this wasn't a thing where we were allowed, to work with clients in an intense way like that, to make tonnes of mistakes, then do it again another year. Hopefully [when the students graduate] they hit the ground running a little bit quicker because it's authentic learning.

Many of the students' outputs were implemented by the clients in the *real world*, giving the students confidence in their own capabilities and conviction that that they were capable of success in their future careers. CS5 shared that "the client actually used our ideas from the official handover, so that was definitely a big boost." APCEL as a setting for confidence building also emerged from the staff perspective with AM1 reporting that:

Part of the experience of dealing with different types of clients is building confidence in our students through that hands-on experience and it allows them to produce real outputs for a client that they can then add to their CV, and I know some of them have done that as part of their online profiles.

Staff also agreed that *real-world* pressure was beneficial to the students' preparedness for industry, with AM3 asserting that:

One of the things that's good about it is the pressure, because it's a real client ... I think it's the reason they get that [professional] transformation because they have to work hard and meet the client every other week.

The findings show that the team's approach to APCEL in the Digital Marketing Agency modules has enabled the students to hone their subject specific skills, develop their meta-skills and give them the experience and confidence for future careers as digital marketers.

How experiential learning changes staff and students' professional practice

Findings reveal that both staff and students' approach to their future professional practice was affected by participation in APCEL. For students this centred around their preparation for industry positions, whilst for staff this was demonstrated in their approach to other module delivery and maintenance of industry knowledge.

Students from both year groups were unanimous in their appreciation of the industry relevance and preparedness APCEL gave them, albeit from different reflective positions. Junior students highlighted the confidence they gained from the experience and how this was of value going into their industry placements the following semester. For instance, CS3 said "it really helped me because I went into placement [the following semester], so, working with live clients was definitely helpful ... it was like a really nice transition." They were also able to see the future value in relation to potential job interviews. CS6 thought that "is definitely going to be helpful, for example, in interviews to showcase work we've done We were working with like a live client." The senior students were able to reflect on the entire process and how, in hindsight, it has helped them in their graduate positions. GS1 confided that it has been invaluable in their current role which requires them to "learn how to, like, juggle things about and prioritise different things."

Both year groups were particularly clear in how working with the *live* clients was of value for future industry positions. CS5 shared that their "client was a family-run business, so they were quite protective over it But that's what industry's like, so it was good to have that experience as well." Meanwhile, GS6 admitted: "the clients sometimes disagreed with what we said, which is actually good because it showed us how to work in industry, it was a good learning experience, because that happens in real life, doesn't it?"

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

Upon reflection the junior students identified areas of their own competencies that required further development to ensure their industry readiness. They viewed the senior position when adopting the *leader* role as an opportunity to enhance both their technical and meta-skills, CS5 stating that they wish to develop “*leadership and confidence in the strategy*” they provide during their final year. These experiences and reflections demonstrate the students’ awareness of the key outcomes of APCEL by allowing them the space to put theoretical knowledge into practice, learn from this and identify future applications and areas for development (Zahay et. al, 2022).

For staff, the participation in APCEL was of value in two, key, ways: maintaining currency in their subject field and their approach to teaching. The interaction with *live* clients was highlighted as valuable to staff as it helped to ensure that they were aware of current industry issues. AM2 recognised that APCEL provides them with opportunities to “keep in contact with industry,” uncover “the key initiatives of organisations, the priorities that they have and how they might be impacted by digital marketing” and “any training resources” related to these. In a fast-moving industry such as digital marketing (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015), APCEL and specifically engagement with *live* clients can help to maintain industry specific knowledge and practice.

The impact of APCEL on the staffs’ approach to the module was more broad ranging in nature. The actual delivery in the room was notable as being different from a traditional module, whilst the longer-term implications for their future practice was also explored. All staff identified that the way in which they approach interactions with students was dramatically different in these modules’ delivery, citing their roles as more akin to coaching / mentoring rather than traditional *lecturing*, i.e. following a *transmissive* delivery mechanism (Pratt & Collins, 2000). AM3 thought that “*mentor* is probably the perfect word to use because you want to encourage that, and you actually want to encourage students to seek mentors in life as well.” AM1 declared: “it’s very much a supportive role in the module that I adopted.” AM2 said “I will coach them [the students] and ask questions ... I tend to prefer coaching to giving answers.” This stated preference of the lecturer’s role being one of coaching / mentoring is in alignment with Ye et al. (2021) and Kolb’s (1984) views on the part ‘active learning’ plays in encouraging students to learn through reflection and develop critical thinking and Heinrich et. Al’s (2021) views on the role of coaching in an experiential learning context.

All staff were positive about the overall experience of delivering APCEL. When reflecting on their own learnings staff recognised specifically how their own professional academic practice had been enhanced, with each demonstrating a desire to alter their approach in other modules within the programme based on their experience within the APCEL delivery. AM2 acknowledged that APCEL is “definitely having an impact in terms of other modules and finding ways to get the students to lead the learning a bit more and provide feedback as well in the process.” Furthermore, engagement with APCEL showed enhanced staff-student relationships by providing opportunity for collaboration. AM1 explained that “because you’re collaborating with them, you’re giving them ideas. You’re hearing their ideas. It does almost feel like you’re part of that ... and it probably does breakdown some barriers.” In addition, the impact on the staffs’ approach in future delivery due to these experiences was highlighted. AM3 said that “any module that I ever run, I would try and have a live client involved ... it’s real, authentic, so I think in the future, it’s almost 100% active learning.”

These findings show that the team’s approach to APCEL in the Digital Marketing Agency modules has had a significant impact on staff and students’ professional practice, with students better prepared for industry and staff maintaining currency in their subject knowledge and altering their approach in other delivery to a more interactive and collaborative form of pedagogy.

The challenges of cross-year collaborative learning

Whilst the discussions of the previous Research Questions relate to ‘triumphs,’ there were no shortage of ‘trials’ along the way. The key issues can be broadly categorised into two areas, 1) relating to the students’ leadership, the understanding of their roles, and 2) the role of and engagement with the clients.

Students as leaders

As this was the first iteration of the agency modules that had both a set of senior and junior students, there were some understandable teething problems. The senior students had previously undertaken the ‘junior’ tasks without guidance from a ‘senior team’ this led to the initial perception that their task and role was “just the same as last year,” as stated by GS2. While GS6 thought that “it started very, very confused...the fourth years didn't know what their role was. The third years didn't know what their role was.” This perception led to a number of issues in the opening weeks of the modules’ delivery as the senior students did not engage with the different task they were now facing, i.e. that of being leaders, rather than being tasked with the operational aspects of the project. AM2 found that “a lot of the challenges were with Stage 4, struggling with the notion of taking the lead of the team and understanding what it meant to be a leader and to apply leadership skills.” The junior students were aware of the issue, with CS2 citing that there was “confusion as to who's responsible for what.” CS1 admitted that “especially for the fourth years, they found that they didn't know what they were doing.” The senior students also highlighted this confusion with GS3 recognising that “we had to [work with clients] in the previous module, so it just confused us quite a lot that whole process.” This issue was acknowledged by the staff, including AM2, who supposed that “the challenges we had the first time we ran the module between the two stages was some students felt like the assessment was the same.”

This lack of understanding of the senior students’ role exacerbated the confusion within groups, as the senior students were then doing many of the ‘operational’ tasks. AM2 found that:

There was a difficulty in terms of them seeing the boundary between what they were doing at Stage 4 and what people were doing at Stage 3 and trying not to take it over if they didn't agree with what the Stage 3 students were doing.

This was supported by the students as GS5 stated that “It was hard for us to kind of differentiate between this is a fourth year's job and this is a third year's job.” Similarly, CS2 thought “there was a bit more blurred lines than there should have been.” Taking cognisance of the issue, the module team quickly staged an *intervention* with the senior students in the fourth week of teaching to reiterate the assessment guidelines and the nature of their role within the project, being that of strategic leadership, rather than those asked to deliver the content / operational outputs. This intervention, in addition to a natural settling period within the project, seemed to recalibrate the students’ focus and clarified their roles. According to GS1:

Actually, getting used to like the leadership role [took time], initially, we didn't know whether we had the authority to be like hey, this is how it's done or like had the authority to be like third years you plan the content and we'll kind of be there to guide.

Upon reflection the senior students were able to articulate how they would have preferred the delivery of the module to have worked, with GS4 advocating for:

A little bit of guidance at the beginning and then slowly take it off. Whilst instead of having just like boom... It was a of pressure for us not only because of the grade, cause of course like we wanted a good

The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

grade, but it was also because I mean we had to manage and say what was good or wasn't good of a third year.

It became clear on further investigation that part of the issues noted above was due to the students' lack of confidence in their own abilities, as noted in the *Cross-year peer-led collaborative learning* section of the *Literature review*. APCEL was beneficial in enhancing this by the end of the process, however at the initial stages this was clearly of concern for staff and students alike. AM1 shared that "sometimes it's just about building the student's confidence up enough to actually take their ideas to the client and ask for feedback. Sometimes there was hesitation to present their ideas." This lack of confidence also manifested itself in the potential perception of a lack of professionalism. AM3 revealed that in some instances "the client came in. Nobody really said hello. They [the students] hadn't set up the room properly. If it was in industry, we would call that unprofessional. But these are things you learn, you know, in industry as well." Students acknowledged their struggles at the start of the project. CS6 talked about being "overwhelmed at the start of the module, while with others, such as CS5, went on to acknowledge that this is still an area for personal development, "just like self-confidence, speaking early and time management over deadlines and not working [*sic*] until the last minute really." Feedback regarding students' understanding of their roles and their initial lack of confidence in their abilities to adopt leadership positions was taken on board by the module team. This was an area that underwent further development and refinement in future iterations, as discussed in the *Reflection, lessons learned and enhancements* section of the study.

The industry clients

The other key issue that caused students difficulty was the role of the industry client. Namely their dual function as both client and mento. Due to the diverse nature of the *live* clients, i.e. some were highly proficient in digital marketing, while others had no background in the field, and were hence *truly* clients. This disparity was noted by students across their respective groups. GS3 said "he [our client] was really engaged in [our project]. Like it would have been nice if we'd had what you said [GS1] that you guys go and do your thing. But ours was like 'I want this.'" Whereas GS6 argued that "they [industry mentors] were 'clients', there was no mentoring from them, so that terminology was confusing from our perspective." Whilst it was noted that not all clients were able to give the same level of mentorship, this was acknowledged as a realistic scenario, i.e. clients would normally have less subject-specific knowledge than an agency worker, and reflected in GS5's statement: "I would have liked a little bit more guidance [from the client], but at the same time I feel like it was just like you know reality."

The level of interaction and feedback from clients also varied which at times caused concern. CS5 mentioned "a slight issue with the client sometimes because he wasn't really answering our queries." Whereas others, such as CS2, were very positive about their client interactions: "we showed them the ideas of the campaigns we'd come up with and they would feedback with constructive criticism, and in the end we could say 'OK, we've done really well', we gave the client what they were after." Staff also noted this difference, with AM1 stating that:

Sometimes students maybe did feel that they didn't get a quick response or the response that they wanted, or the feedback they wanted within a particular time frame, and it was up to us as members of staff to manage those expectations.

Staff acknowledged that there was a training process required with the industry mentors. AM2 acknowledged that "we definitely have to also manage the expectations of the clients and [at times] teach them about formative feedback." From a staff perspective there was another challenge of working with

clients, in addition to the sourcing / outreach process in the first place, there was an expectation management exercise, as discussed by AM2:

I think it's also maybe a challenge because sometimes a client may contact us and say the students are not listening and it's almost saying to them, 'they are students, this is a learning process.' They may be working for you, but they're not working for you on payroll. So, the way you communicate with them has to be that you're providing constructive feedback.

The disparity in the industry mentors' digital marketing knowledge and expectations led to challenges of managing student expectations across the modules, however, the students were able to reflect that this was a very real scenario they would face in industry, that said it proved a challenge for the module teams to manage.

The research shows that the key challenges of cross-year collaborative teaching focus around student interactions within teams lie in the clarity of the roles they are expected to fulfil, and the relationships with their *live* clients.

Reflections, lessons learned and enhancements

From the above discussions, there were many 'triumphs,' but from the 'trials' the greatest lessons were learned, offering the opportunity for further enhancement. From these lessons, the module team have already enacted numerous changes, and in the process of this article have identified additional alterations that will be made for the next iteration.

Enacted enhancements

In preparation for the 2023/24 iteration of APCEL, the module team made changes based on their previous experience of running the modules. Most notably, an alteration to the final year module title, previously titled 'Digital Marketing Management' became 'Digital Marketing Leadership.' The aim being to draw attention to the leadership role in the final stage and in doing so better distinguishing and defining the senior role for the students. In addition to this, various alterations to the delivery of the modules were made building on the lessons learned from the previous iteration:

1. To enhance students understanding and confidence in the leadership role more emphasis on leadership theory is given in the opening weeks of delivery for the senior students.
2. To overcome challenges associated with the diversity of clients' understanding, ability, and direction, a significantly enhanced 'client discovery' session is used to launch the module in the opening week of teaching, with a series of interactive discussions and activities guiding the students through the critical aspects of understanding the clients' needs and wants.
3. To help clarify individual student roles, teams draw up a 'code of conduct' that they all sign and agree to work to at the start of the session, this is then used if there are any disputes.
4. To help students understand their role and contribution to the project, team weekly progress reports are now a compulsory part of the process and assessment.
5. To help overcome team challenges, a weekly 'health check' discussion is scheduled as part of the students' weekly meetings with their academic mentors to allow an open conversation in any teamwork issues that may arise.

6. To help clarify the specific expectations associated with the junior and senior roles, minor changes to the wording of the assessments at both stages have been implemented.

Future enhancements

As identified in the *Findings and discussion* section, the nature of the industry mentor's role caused some disquiet, upon further reflection brought about through the construction of this article and the primary data collection, the module team have identified the following enhancements for future iterations:

1. The industry mentor title will be replaced with 'industry client', with the aim to eliminate the confusion of the role in the minds of both the industry professionals and the students.
2. An enhancement to the industry-facing guide will be made to further outline the project, commitments, and expectations for the industry professional.
3. Greater clarity will be provided within the module documentation for the students on the nature of the industry professional's role, now firmly that of the 'client'.

Conclusions

The key findings of this study demonstrate that whilst cross-year, collaborative learning has numerous challenges, it is highly beneficial to both students and staff. The Academic Mentor role adopted by module staff involves interactive teaching through mentoring activities and the facilitation of *live* client interactions to help empower students to engage in active learning. This authentic and experiential approach to digital marketing education not only enables staff to maintain industry relevance in a fast-moving subject field (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2020), and reflect on their own practice with beneficial impact on other areas of delivery, but also students to benefit from peer mentorship, working in authentic environments related to their chosen career path and the accompanying development and enhancement of key meta-skills, such as leadership, which are invaluable to building their confidence and employability (SDS, n.d.). On reflection on the 'trials' of APCEL, lessons were learned resulting in module enhancements, e.g. emphasis on leadership theory and accountability with senior students, and on the distinction between team roles and stage-specific summative assessment criteria with all students. Additional alterations identified in the process of this article will be implemented.

Whilst the research team recognises that the specific context of the Digital Marketing Agency structure applied within APCEL may not be applicable in other industries, finding similar hierarchical structures present in other industries that require hands-on consultative project management experience and cross-team collaboration on a shared project is worthy of consideration regardless of the subject discipline to promote the professional development of students and the advancement of academic practice.

Biographies

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The Trials and Triumphs of Running Cross-Year Experiential Modules: Blending Theory and Practice to Advance Student Professional Development and Academic Practice.

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