Bridging the Theory and Practice Gap in Marketing Education

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Abstract: The paper proposes a new marketing course curriculum for bridging the theory and practice gap in marketing education. This new approach aims to develop students' marketing and soft skills like communication, creativity, and collaboration and facilitate their integration into professional life. By applying a project-based learning approach and integrating innovation methods like design thinking, the course curriculum improves students' engagement and ability to address and solve real and impactful company challenges. The paper also provides a detailed road map of tasks related to the preparation phase and project modules for instructors who consider implementing this new marketing curriculum. Moreover, it identifies areas for further research related to measuring this new course curriculum's impact on the learning process and faculty development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Due to students' lack of engagement in traditional learning activities and the difficulties of preparing students for their professional life, there is a significant interest in new marketing curricula from instructors and the academic community (Casado-Aranda, Sánchez-Fernández, Montoro-Ríos, & Horcajadas, 2021).

The paper draws on an actual marketing plan course, a mandatory subject in the third year of the undergraduate study program in Marketing and Advertising (bachelor study). The course was transformed into a PBL type entirely focused on company projects to respond to the marketing curricula challenges. This new curriculum started in 2018/2019 and has evolved to the academic year 2021/2022, incorporating different activities, dynamics, methods, and tools.

The goal of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to provide marketing faculty with clear insights on the particular challenges of marketing applied projects in company challenges. Secondly, to propose a new learning and teaching methodology for effectively implementing marketing course curricula and, therefore, to bridge the theory and practice gap in marketing education. The relevancy of this contribution is supported by educational trends and recent studies that call for new approaches in marketing curricula (Athaide & Desai, 2005; Ferrell & Ferrell, 2020).

The paper starts reviewing the marketing curricula challenges (section 2) discussed in theory and based on studies from pedagogical, project-based learning and business-oriented education fields. Section 3 draws on a case of a marketing course, a structured approach designed to overcome the acknowledged issues in marketing education. Then, section 4 examines the results of new course implementation from the perspective of students and companies. The paper discusses results against the theory (section 5) and concludes with the lessons learned, limitations, and opportunities for further research (section 6).

2 MARKETING CURRICULA CHALLENGES

2.1 Active Learning and Company Projects

The fast-changing academic and business environment demands new educational marketing methods and tools, in line with the challenges students face when concluding their studies. More than ever, instructors are required to prepare students for their professional life. Besides delivering in-depth

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theoretical knowledge, it is critical to enhancing students' creativity and practical ability to address society's present and future challenges and the business world (Mei & Hu, 2018).

Marketing instructors also need to put the widely accepted principles of key pedagogical thinkers into practice, particularly some of the views of John Dewey (e.g., we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience; the real process of education should be the process of learning to think through the application of real problems) and Jean Piaget (e.g., the goals of educations are to create men who are capable of doing new things and form minds which can be critical, can verify, and not accept everything they are offered).

Marketing education is having issues with the involvement of students in traditional learning activities, e.g., lecture classes with textbooks, slides and videos (Casado-Aranda, Sánchez-Fernández, Montoro-Ríos, & Horcajadas, 2021). Several factors drive the lack of students' engagement and motivation: i) too much focus on lecture classes that do not provide students the required work skills such as creative problem-solving, teamwork, leadership or critical thinking; ii) traditional (not updated) content and methods; iii) difficulty to apply digital technologies in a more meaningful, exciting and relevant manner; iii) silo approach, which limits integrated learning and active teaching methodologies (Athaide & Desai, 2005; Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Mills & Hair, 2021).

One of the learning activities introduced in higher education to respond to students' disengagement is the PBL problem-based learning in company projects (Bartholomew, 2021; Casado-Aranda et al., 2021). Adopting PBL provides an opportunity to create a new curriculum that moves away from the traditional theory-based education and focuses on student-centered, project-centered, and business integrated perspectives (Mei & Hu, 2018). Students become the protagonists and active players in addressing real-world company challenges/problems, acquiring knowledge, participating successfully in the tasks, learning by doing, reflecting about what they are doing and why, and collaborating more with their peers.

Moreover, active learning and engagement can also be achieved in marketing curricula with design game elements and mechanics, to prepare students for the situation analysis stage of the marketing planning process (Harding & Alexander, 2019).

2.2 Integrative and Digital Curricula

The call for more interdisciplinary and integrative marketing curricula aligned with industry practice is not limited to current silos of interest, e.g., strategy, sales, or consumer behavior (Athaide & Desai, 2005; Ferrell & Ferrell, 2020). When incorporated in the marketing plan curricula, emergent innovation approaches like "lean start up" and "jobs to be done" and "design thinking" facilitate the development of desired innovation skills among students that meet the 21st-century workplace requirements (Klink, Zhang, & Athaide, 2020). For instance, several studies suggest that design thinking, and other related concepts like business design, design-driven innovation, or service design are being integrated into marketing education as an appropriate approach to respond to market complexity and turbulence (Glen, Suciu, Baughn, & Anson, 2015; Schumacher & Mayer, 2018). Incorporating design thinking approaches in the curricula allows students to develop a set of critical capabilities (e.g., user empathy, problem framing, visualization, prototyping and testing, and multidisciplinary collaboration) that will prepare them for future company/business roles.

The digital learning transition accelerated by Covid-19 also stressed the need to revise marketing curricula and new pedagogical tools. As in many other areas, processes have become more digital to overcome the limitations of the pandemic. New communication platforms, like Zoom, and Microsoft Teams and collaboratives online spaces like Miro and Mural are becoming the standard to match actual learning activities (e.g., PBL company projects) with students' learning styles and interests (Bartholomew, 2021). At the same time, more awareness is given to complex issues associated with AI and other advances in technology, safety privacy and ethics (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2020).

3 MARKETING COURSE DESIGN

3.1 Course Overview

The course is divided into 15 weeks during a semester with 2 classes of 3 hours each week in 90 contact hours. There are 27 students average in a course and nearly eight courses running during the first and second semester of the academic year. It is intended to integrate multidisciplinary knowledge that students have learned during multiple disciplines, e.g., market

research, consumer behavior, finance applied to marketing, strategic and operational marketing. Students work in teams performing the planned activities (see 3.3). Most of the classes are devoted to practice (hands-on and monitoring) but also powered by dedicated theory pills (concept delivery) to enrich the learning process. Until so far, students are allowed to form their teams by themselves, but other options might be available, e.g., teams created by the instructors.

During 2020–2021 it moved to a hybrid model with synchronous online classes complemented with some presential classes, which posed other types of challenges and limitations in terms of interaction and engagement. Instructors needed to adapt the class dynamic, approach, and flow to a new environment, making students more committed to the classes and course plan. Besides having access to most of the features of Blackboard learning management system (now using Canvas, e.g., groups and discussion forums), and implementing new communication and collaborative tools (e.g., Miro and Mural digital workspaces), students were encouraged to prepare the classes in advance by having a detailed program and expected outcomes.

3.2 Course Objectives and Setup

The course was designed to reach the following learning objectives: i) to develop marketing skills by applying new methods and tools to real company challenges; ii) to develop soft skills like communication, creativity and collaboration; iii) to facilitate the integration into professional life, incorporating solid theoretical and practical components.

The entire learning experience is driven by a clear focus on company market challenges, e.g., launching new products/services in the marketplace, improving the customer experience, designing business models for entering in new market segments, expanding distribution channels, designing marketing campaigns. Students' teams, formed by 3 up to 6 members, are requested to prepare a marketing plan accordingly to the type of challenge submitted by the company. Students always bring a different and exploratory perspective and their personal and creative vision of the challenges.

This focus partially explains why this curriculum has been applied positively in collaboration with many diverse companies, e.g., beverages, energy, cosmetics, business services and retail, during the past years. Another reason is the integration of new perspectives, methods and tools like design thinking

that enables the development of work skills and contributes to bolder ideas. Finally, the type of classes has been adapted to growing face-to-face interactions from 2021/2022 onwards. Three formats may coexist in a single class. One is the concept delivery class (CDC), a more lecture-based class that introduces the fundamental concepts that student teams should use throughout the project phases and programmed topics. The other is a more hands-on class (HOC) for applying concepts to respond to project phases and topics. The third is the mentoring class (MC) to monitor and evaluate the workouts and provide feedback for further developments.

Every semester, instructors engage with company managers to understand their challenges and explore opportunities for collaboration. The chosen company challenges are interesting for both parties, i.e., for the convenience of the company and the overall students learning experience. Companies are aware that this is an academic project, which seeks to improve learning by responding to specific market needs. It is not intended to do consulting work for the company but to use real challenges and company data to bridge the theory and practice gap. For this reason, the assessment of the work carried out by student teams is solely the instructor's responsibility.

Companies undertaking these projects prepare a briefing with internal and market data and provide details about the challenge, presented to students at the beginning of the course (see course plan). Despite the teams' responsibility for collecting appropriate data for their project, companies typically maintain an open channel with the instructor to provide more information and answer upcoming questions. At the end of both project assignments (see course plan), company managers will assist the marketing plan presentations and give concrete feedback to each team.

As this is a structured learning process, teams can apply appropriate methods and tools to conduct the project and respond to concrete and real company challenges. The project-based learning method encourages active participation of student teams in discussions, exercises, and execution of project tasks, enabling them to incorporate input from company managers, instructors, and peers.

3.3 Course Modules

The project consists of teamwork (3-5 students) to prepare a marketing plan for a company throughout the semester. Before going through the modules that correspond to the 3 stages of a typical marketing plan, teams are required to prepare the project.

3.3.1 Introduction

▪ 0.1 Challenge confirmation – team's interpretation of the company challenge.

▪ 0.2 Definition of methods and tools - team's definition of the most appropriate methodological approach to responding to the challenge, including data collection (primary data, e.g., interviews, surveys, observations, and secondary, e.g., market studies, scientific articles, trend reports, benchmarking with other sectors, statistics) and data analysis (methods and tools that will be used throughout the different stages of the project).

3.3.2 Module 1. Analysis (Current State and Trend Inputs)

▪ 1.1 Internal analysis: characterization of the company in terms of strategy, organizational culture, portfolio of products and services, customer segments (in volume and value), personas and experience mapping, portfolio life cycle, brand positioning, marketing variables used and evaluation of the company's most critical resources and capabilities.

▪ 1.2 External analysis: trends and forces of change in the marketplace, relationship with the main stakeholders, direct and indirect competition, quantification of the actual and potential market in the primary market segments.

▪ 1.3 Systematization of findings and identification of ideas to address the company challenge.

3.3.3 Module 2. Strategy (Choices about the Desired Future State)

▪ 2.1 Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning: STP definition for the chosen idea.

▪ 2.2 Definition of the value proposition (using Geoffrey Moore Value Proposition approach).

▪ 2.3 Design the prototype for the chosen idea: e.g., using drawings, mockups, apps screens, or any other form of visual demonstration.

▪ 2.4 Presentation of the prototype to the target customers to test their interest in the proposed idea (if they don't demonstrate clear support, phases 1.3 to 2.3 must be repeated).

▪ 2.5 Confirmation of the value proposition: VP can be refined following target customer feedback.

3.3.4 Module 3. Plan (Actions to Get to the Desired Future State)

▪ 3.1 Definition of objectives (financial, marketing and social), indicators and targets.

▪ 3.2 Outline the main actions/initiatives proposed to implement the objectives, the team and the scheduling of actions over the next 3 years.

▪ 3.3 Presentation of the idea's impact on customer experience (new mapping, which can be based on the comments received in point 2.4 by target customers who tested the prototype of the proposed idea).

▪ 3.4 Presentation of the financial impacts of the idea: using sales forecast, marketing budget and estimating other costs needed for the presentation of the profit and loss statement.

▪ 3.5 Evaluation and control of the plan by elaborating scenarios, such as realistic, optimistic, or pessimistic, to measure the strategy's progress.

3.4 Student Assignments

Students will have to deliver 2 project reports and individual creative work. The purpose is to have a more balanced evaluation of students based on a project team and individual contributions (table 1).

Table 1: Assignments.

Types of Assignments	Deadlines	Weights
Project Report (Modules 1 and 2)	Middle of semester	30% of final grade
Project Report (Modules 1, 2 and 3)	End of semester	40% of final grade
Individual work (Logbook)	End of semester	30% of final grade

The evaluation criteria for the 2 project deliverables encompasses:

▪ Presentation – 30% (with 40% peer review) that includes: clarity and organization of ideas (70%); visual and oral communication (30%).

▪ Report content – 50% that includes: quality of work plan and proposed structure (50%); justification of all the assumptions (20%); the potential impact of proposals in response to the challenge (30%).

▪ Reading and visual appearance (20%).

Introducing the logbook, which replaced an individual written test, provided students a more creative platform to express the lessons learned and their critical views of the learning experience. The

logbook encourages students to keep a record (physical preferred, but digital is allowed) of the course learning process, insights and outcomes in real time. This is also a method to help them become aware of the course learning goals and a simple way to return to them later in their professional careers. This type of assignment is graded based on the following criteria:

- Breakthrough views/conclusions (40%);
- Variety of topics registered (30%);
- Organization and readability of content (30%).

3.5 Course Implementation

The tasks related to the preparation phase and project modules are broken down into 30 classes during a semester, providing a detailed road map for instructors who consider implementing this new course curriculum (figure 1).
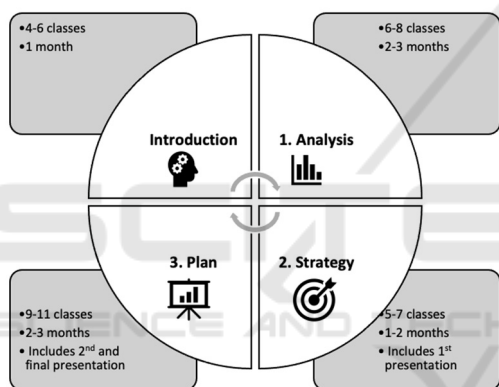

Figure 1: Course implementation steps.

3.5.1 Introduction

Four up to six classes are needed to introduce the course and form the groups. The first two classes (CDC) help define the course structure, evaluation, methodology (PBL), and planning. It also contributes to reflecting on project core concepts by discussing an inspiring marketing and strategy article.

The following two classes (HOC) are dedicated to discussing the company's challenge (prepared in advance by the company manager in collaboration with the instructor) and planning the collection of secondary and primary data (that can, in some cases, be common to all groups). An active search for new marketing and innovation methods and tools is also promoted among the groups.

The last classes are dedicated to presenting the company briefing and discussing the challenge with the company manager (HOC). Having a clearer picture of the challenge, groups will define the methodological approach (phases, methods, and tools) they should follow during the project. Then, each group should present the steps of their project, the methods and tools they intend to use, and the type of data they intend to collect (primary and secondary data) and receive feedback from the instructor (MC).

3.5.2 Analysis

This first step requires six up to eight classes to perform the strategic analysis and the identification of an idea to respond to the company challenge. It starts with a strategic analysis and identification of business opportunities class (CDC) and others (HOC) to conduct the internal and external analysis (1.1 and 1.2). Data collection follows in parallel - secondary (desk research) and primary (e.g., preparing interviews and surveys scripts; conducting field research and sharing the findings).

Immediately after the class about strategic analysis methods and tools (CDC), groups should systematize their findings and identify potential ideas (1.3). The final class (MC) will be dedicated to discussing market opportunities from the situation analysis. Each group should list 3 ideas and choose the one with more significant potential to respond to the company challenge and receive feedback from the instructor.

3.5.3 Strategy

The instructor opens the discussion about the strategy definition process (CDC). Based on the chosen idea, groups should define their segmentation, targeting, positioning and value proposition (2.1 and 2.2) for the following two classes (HOC). Then, a new class (CDC) is needed to explain how groups will prototype and test their strategy/idea (2.3), followed by two other classes (HOC). One is to present the value proposition of their strategy/idea and receive feedback from the instructor. The other serves to design the prototype for the proposed idea. Having this task concluded, each group should test the prototype and receive feedback from target customers (2.4). Finally, groups with the support of the instructor (MC) should confirm / refine the value proposition (2.5).

Before delivering the first assignment, groups should have the opportunity to present a draft version of their report. This intermediate presentation aims to receive feedback on the project's status and improve its reports. In the final class (MC), groups should present the 1st report (steps 1 and 2) to the company manager and instructor.

3.5.4 Plan

The third step takes nine up to eleven classes. It starts with a class (CDC) to discuss the way groups should set the objectives, indicators and targets (3.1), followed by practical classes to execute this task (HOC). Subsequently, two classes (HOC) are required to define the main actions/initiatives proposed to implement the objectives (3.2). Each group should be well-positioned to present their objectives, indicators, goals and main actions/initiatives and receive feedback from the instructor (MC).

Another set of classes is needed to underline the significant impacts of the proposed ideas. This process starts with a discussion (CDC) of the meaning and implications of the desired customer experience (3.3.) and a practical class (HOC) to groups present the impacts of their ideas. The other type of impact is the financial (3.4). Besides going through the details of the creation of the financial model (CDC), groups should also present their cases.

Two classes (HOC) using ideaChef design thinking game are planned to test the proposed idea. Groups should discuss their views from different perspectives to better understand the potential of the idea to address the company challenge. Before concluding the project, groups should take other classes to revise the prototype, value proposition, and the evaluation and control of the plan (3.5). In the last two classes (MC), groups should first present a draft version of their report and then, in the final class deliver the 2nd report (steps 1, 2, and 3) to the company manager and instructor.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Student Outcomes and Assessment

Students involved in this type of course curricula are usually surprised with the approach and the results achieved. The word cloud (figure 2) shows the feedback provided by a sample of 53 students collected on June 2020 concerning the following question: what is the word that best describes the experience you had during this course?

Figure 2: Student's experience.

Several comments, collected during the classes, reinforced the satisfaction of working with company cases. At the same time, students mentioned their main difficulties in handling such a complex project. Besides the usual constraints associated with the pandemic situation still impacting the learning process, e.g., lack of in-person meetings, interviews, and observations, students revealed two significant difficulties. The first was conducting financial analysis and projections due to market uncertainty and lack of data (not always provided by companies). The second was a lack of analytical skills.

4.2 Company Outcomes and Assessment

Eight companies were asked to evaluate the project results after the final students' presentation. The following examples (table2) illustrate the type of feedback received.

Table 2: Company's experiences.

Companies	Testimonials
Head of Brand & Marketing - Non-food Retailer	The balance was very positive. Teams had several opportunities to apply knowledge from different areas of marketing, such as digital marketing, UX design, content marketing, app development, among others. They all demonstrated a high level of proficiency with the research phase, problem outline, solution design and prototyping.
General Manager - Co-Working Spaces	Teams demonstrated creativity, commitment to do more and better, good manners and proper conduct. The reports were detailed and conducted with rigor. It was a very exciting project.
Marketing Director - Beverages	All teams innovated with ideas related to product, brand activation and Route2Market.
Head of Design - Online Luxury Marketplace	It was a pleasure to attend the students' presentation and definitely their proposals were relevant to our product.
Marketing Manager - Distribution and marketing of liquid fuels	The students' external views and out of the box ideas allowed us to understand if our strategy is aligned with the market and our target needs. It is important for students to have concrete challenges from companies a contact with the business reality. These were very enriching experiences for both of us.

Table 2: Company's experiences (cont.).

Companies	Testimonials
CEO - Co-Working Spaces	The recommendations and quality of the marketing plans responded to the challenges and went beyond expectations, identifying future growth opportunities.
Co-Founder, CMO & E-commerce - Distribution and marketing of food snacks	As an emerging brand in the market, it is essential for us to be close to the new generations of consumers, and being challenged with students' open mind and creativity. No doubt it was enriching! This is also fundamental for us to identify talent.
Marketing Manager - Online Multi-Brand Marketplace	Proposed solutions will for sure contribute to design the future of our company. Through field research, students were able to gather valuable inputs. One of the teams proposed a solution to engage with the community beyond the purchase, which will serve to retain and attract customers.

5 DISCUSSION

The course findings show that the proposed marketing curriculum successfully addresses the challenges identified in the literature. By looking into the requirements for new educational marketing methods and tools, it is possible to understand how this new type of curricula can provide multiple positive outcomes, particularly in the engagement and training of students for their professional life. It is recognized by students and companies the advantages of enhancing students' creativity and learning through the application of real problems (Mei & Hu, 2018). The redesign of the marketing curricula focuses on a student-centered and project-centered teaching and active learning environment (Mei & Hu, 2018).

Applying PBL in company projects (Bartholomew, 2021; Casado-Aranda et al., 2021) is not a novel approach. But it is an excellent opportunity to incorporate and integrate new disciplines and digital tools that are critical for the development of a set of essential student work skills, e.g., teamwork, collaboration and creative problem-solving (Athaide & Desai, 2005; Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Mills & Hair, 2021).

Companies and students acknowledge the benefit of using disciplines and innovation approaches like design thinking (Glen, Suciu, Baughn, & Anson, 2015; Schumacher & Mayer, 2018) and game-based

learning (Harding & Alexander, 2019). These approaches are much more appropriate for dealing with the market turbulence and uncertainty related to the usual company challenges that teams address. Students also benefit from using new online collaborative workspaces, e.g., Miro and communication platforms, e.g., Microsoft Teams (Bartholomew, 2021), that are commonly used in companies. Learning to apply these technologies in company challenges also improves their collaboration with other parties and future co-workers.

Definitively, having a clear purpose and a challenging project to accomplish, which is clearly shown in the feedback received, contributes to increasing students' commitment and engagement in the learning process, making it more active and in line with future workforce requirements.

6 CONCLUSION

This type of curricula improves students' ability to address and solve real and impactful company challenges. The proposed course design seems appropriate and can match major requirements for new educational marketing methods and tools. Lessons learned about this new approach are listed as follows:

- Applications – While primarily targeting marketing instructors, practitioners may also benefit from these new marketing curricula when they need to organize teams and processes to address fundamental challenges. Any business and innovation challenge can apply the cutting-edge methods and tools used by teams during the project. For instance, the presentation of the prototype to the target customers (module 2, step 2.4) enables the project team to experiment with user-helpful ideas by constantly iterating the initial offering and continuously learning from market feedback.
- Resources – This new marketing curriculum follows a process that requires specific recourses. The classroom must accommodate a variety of activities, from lectures to workshops, where students go through experiential learning that is not well suited with fixed desks. Furthermore, it is critical to find an instructor with the experience, skills, and exact fit for this particular approach, setting the class's tone.

■ Time requirements – This process relies on having enough time to discuss, reflect and fully understand the company challenge, do market research (data collection and analysis) and conduct all the project activities, e.g., observing, interviewing, prototype reviewing and testing. And also, time to acquire, advance and master the new skills.

This paper also has limitations that can be addressed by future research. Firstly, there is apparent new curricula miss-matched with less soft-skilled students. Despite all the advantages already identified, it was found that it is still hard for some students to take full advantage of this approach due to difficulties adapting and changing their mindset. As an example of these types of problems, one student recognized that was not able to concentrate on tasks and develop the project during the hands-on classes. Most probably, some students are still too much influenced by traditional learning activities and have difficulty moving to another type of learning. Also, the kind of approach that supports the new curricula encourages students to constantly review their assumptions and move back and forth until they become more confident with the results. It means that it is a constraint for students that show problems learning in a non-linear manner. Further research in this field would probably help students quickly adapt to this new type of learning and improve their capability to collaborate with others.

Secondly, it is still needed to measure the real impact of this new course curriculum in the learning process. It would be helpful to test the differences between students who take the new versus traditional course curricula and understand, for instance, the areas that require development and opportunities for applying other methods, tools and technologies to improve the course's effectiveness and student´s engagement. This course can be adapted and enhanced with additional tools, resources, and dynamics.

Finally, there is also room for improvement in terms of faculty development. Instructors may also face barriers to moving into this new teaching and learning environment. This new process is more transparent and requires new teaching skills like mentoring and co-creating value with students. Thus, it makes sense to explore both the obstacles and methods that instructors can apply to overcome adoption issues.

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