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# Using Practitioner Experiences in Experiential Learning

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## **ABSTRACT**

In different research studies, many practitioners have voiced concerns about the professional preparedness and skill levels of current communication graduates. The relative knowledge and specific skill sets of a university's communication program graduates are critical to the opinions of the current practitioners who control the professional opportunities available in the students' future. These seemingly harsh criticisms by professionals deserve increased attention from educators because many are the gatekeepers for the profession. This attention is also warranted by the fact the credibility and perceived effectiveness of the programs as a resource for future professionals is highly dependent on the perceived competency of their graduates (Schwartz, Yarbrough & Shakara, 1992).

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Several studies, including the original Port of Entry Report (1999) by the Commission on Public Relations, concur with much of the current practitioners' critique of communication graduates and the disparity that exists between employer expectations and student competences. In addition to the report's requirement that competent graduates must possess a thorough and accurate understanding of the current practices of the profession, critical thinking and problem solving skills were also named by practitioners as areas of deficiency in recent graduates (Port of Entry, 1999; Guiniven, 1998). The ability to conduct strategic planning is another expertise practitioners and educators believe students need to acquire (Attansey, Okigbo, & Smith, 2008; Motschall & Najor, 2001).

Additionally, practitioners and educators agree that communication graduates must have the ability to critically analyze responses to societal changes caused by new technologies, global communications, and fragmented publics, all of which continue to foster challenging problems for business organizations (Motschall & Najor, 2001). Motschall and Najor recommended a client-centered approach for teaching communication courses that provide opportunities for graduates to become adept at analytical thinking and successfully solving organizational problems.

Other communication studies have also pointed out that graduates have a lack of understanding about the daily operations of a modern business organization (Guineven, 1999) and an overall lack of business competency (Wright & Turk, 1990) lacking the more management-oriented skills, including budgeting, organizational, and decision making (VanSlyke Turk, 1989). The practitioner skill set outlined in the Commission's report reflects a focus that would better position graduates in a dwindling job market by preparing them to become communication "generalists" and more marketable in the private sector.

Bush (2009) confirmed that data continually confirms the ongoing existence of hiring problems by communication professionals marked an absence of practical experience of their prospective employees and emphasizes the commission's support of experiential learning as one of its core directives to teach the skill sets required by practitioners. Various forms of experiential learning, including required internships and the capstone campaigns course, are already a critical part of the concentration course curriculum in communication programs across the nation; and even though the objectives of these traditional programs is to fulfill the need for "real world" exposure, they are often problematic in delivering relevant practitioner experience.

Beard and Morton (1999) concluded that although the acquisition of work-related skills through experiential learning characterizes the basic premise of internships, many of the conditions required for an optimal experience are often absent. Problems such as remote campus locations, student initiative and attitude, and the quality of worksite supervision are frequently a deterrent to the acquisition of the desired career skills during an internship.

Campaigns courses, Benigni and Cameron (1999) argue, are only minimally successful at fulfilling the primary responsibility of preparing the student for the real world. They concur with Kendall (1998) that properly structured campaign courses should be able to provide experiential exposure to additional management skills, including team building, delegation, supervision,

motivation and peer evaluation; but the more appropriate programs should immerse students into real world issues that require calculated strategy and planning.

To better facilitate real-world preparation during the campaigns course, Kendall (1998) recommended an “agency format”, which consists of student teams. Bush (2009) also recognized the inadequacies of the campaigns course and discussed the benefits of replication of the “agency format”. She pointed out that various experiential learning studies reveal limitations in teaching career related processes and advocated a communication agency experiential learning model that would have a pedagogical focus on process learning, professional identity development; and career choice and opportunities. Even though a vast majority of campaigns courses are taught in a team environment, Benigni and Cameron (1999) reported that only half of the courses utilize any agency structure.

Motschall and Najor (2001) argued that effective experiential experiences could be more readily attained by hiring professors and instructors with an inventory of professional experiences that can be applied in the classroom. Attansey, Okigbo, and Schmidt (2008) claimed that continued convergence of practitioners and teachers will not only have an enormous impact on students for a career, but it may also accelerate the dominance of more “active learning strategies” advocated by Patridge (2001).

#### IMPLEMENTING PRACTITIONER PREPAREDNESS

As a former practitioner like Lee Bush, I have a teaching strategy that has a predisposition for experiential approaches that give students an opportunity to learn in a more professional context. The different experiential learning strategies used in my classes also allow me to incorporate my professional experiences acquired while working on integrated marketing communication campaigns with a diverse group of former, national clients (Marriot Courtyard, FFV Cookies, Media General, HCA Hospitals, B.F. Saul Mortgage, Precision Tune, and New York Enhance Financial). Whatever the designated focus of a particular lecture, a specific professional case experience from my background is reviewed to reinforce the learning process in a more relatable context.

Class structures, formats, and assignment syllabi have been significantly revised to better align with the previously stated practitioners’ expectations for new graduates entering the professional communication community. Students are exposed to many of the required skill sets and professional practices addressed in those academic and professional studies, (analytical/critical thinking, problem solving, business competency, and the communication campaign process) through experiential learning exercises under the following, five basic learning outcome areas:

#### COMMUNICAITON AGENCY FORMAT

In all my communication courses, I replicate the communication “agency format” through the use of student teams, as Kendall suggests, to better facilitate “real world” preparation. Bush also believes that one of the basic voids in our pedagogical focus is the area of career opportunities available for communication graduates. I believe that in the lower level, core courses, like IMC (Integrated Marketing Communication), is when the students need to begin consideration of their

future vocational options and after the different positions (across the wide spectrum of the different disciplines in the profession) and their functionality are reviewed, students are assigned to a team and begin to “role model” when job functions/titles are delegated by the elected president. Although, with the small size of the “agency teams”, each member initially carries a “Director” title (Account Management, Account Planning, Creative, Media, Public Relations, etc.), they share the workload in various segments of the campaign, especially the early research and planning stages. Although there are often problems with team dynamics, the management skills like team building; delegation, motivation and peer evaluation learned in the student agency teams can be invaluable to future professionals according to Benigni and Cameron.

### PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

As stated earlier, studies and practitioners alike believe one of the critical deficiencies of communication graduates, was their understanding of the practices of the profession. Many of the professional systems I experienced in my career are introduced into the student agency teams, including conference reports of each of their meetings, weekly status reports, presentation/production scheduling, internal brainstorming, and the completion of the client brief and creative brief formats.

### CLIENT ENTERED APPROACH-THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

Teaching strategies using the “client centered approach” recommended by Motschall and Najor are particularly effective when implemented through the student teams’ development of an entire integrated communication campaign where students replicate the campaign processes in the two basic stages, planning and production, typically initiated by my former, professional agencies. Dictated by different budgets, the specific focus and sophistication of the campaigns varies from the 200 level to the 400-Capstone level.

In the 200 level IMC class, the campaign focus is on brand positioning and the learning objectives are to understand and successfully integrate the different communication disciplines in a unified message that supports a new rebranding of the students’ own university. As Motschall and Najor predicted, students begin to become more adept at analytical thinking and problem solving as they complete the different requirements of a campaign, including research compilation and organization, insights identification, problem prioritization, and establishment of objectives, strategies to fulfill those objectives, and the tactics to implement the strategies.

With the Copywriting classes, the campaign focus is not only on developing strong creative across different media outlets but include the foundation principles (brand positioning, target segmentation, consumer/brand insight alignment, and singular problem focus) that strengthen another identified graduate weakness, conceptual thinking, and provide skill sets professionals deem necessary for results oriented, award winning creative. As a former practitioner who worked on a litany of national “package goods” accounts (Eskimo Pie, Dukes Mayonnaise, Welch’s Juice Bars, White House Apple Juice and Sauce, FFV Cookies), I’m cognizant of the increased exposure of students, working on these product campaigns, to a greater multiplicity of communication disciplines and practices, a knowledge deficit noted by academics and practitioners alike. In these classes, the brand assigned for the semester’s team work is always selected from the list of my past clients and the designated campaign requirements include many elements not applicable in other campaigns (product testing, package design, trade shows and

campaigns, merchandising displays, sales promotions, event marketing, etc.); once again giving students more experience in different professional practices, providing more information for career selection and extending better career opportunities through reinforcement of students as communication “generalists”.

### STRATEGIC PLANNING

As stated earlier, the ability to conduct strategic planning is another expertise communication students need to acquire (Attaanse, Okigbo, & Smith, 2008). Educators and practitioners also believe students need to think strategically in response to the ongoing changes in society, technologies, media, globalization, and traditional targeting (Motschall & Najor, 2001). After the first year in my current position, I developed a strategic planning course, Account Planning, based on the communication agency position I once held. As a sequenced prerequisite for the capstone campaigns course, the students are responsible for all the initial campaign planning stages necessary for the comprehensive development of the strategic basis for the campaign’s creative brief. For the Account Planning and Campaigns courses, the client assigned is the annual NSCA client selected by the American Advertising Federation.

### PROFESSIONALISM

In an attempt to further alleviate the absence of the practical experience mentioned by the private sector as a skills void in graduates, the campaign development in the Capstone class is formatted to reflect a more sophisticated business model that better parallels the professional standards expected in the communication field. After a review of the client brief, each team reports their initial weekly progress, and later participates in scheduled, power point presentations of their team’s development of each major phase of the campaign. During the semester, there is an increased focus on the management-oriented skills (budgeting, organizational, and decision making) designated by Turk (1988) and necessary for the successful development of a campaign. To further simulate the fiercely competitive, communication profession, final presentations of a complete campaign are judged by multiple jurors (academic and professional) and only one agency team is awarded the account (1<sup>st</sup> place).

Hopefully, the experiential learning exercises incorporated by a former practitioner in these classes will teach the skill sets, and achieve the learning objectives outlined earlier, perpetuating a better understanding of the processes and practices of the profession and qualify communication graduates to become more marketable in the private sector.

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