# Fit for Purpose: placing the PLE at the centre of marketing education

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**Abstract**

*This paper evaluates how marketing educators can develop appropriate curriculum content and the supporting personal learning environments (PLEs) made possible by developments in social technologies. As educators we should be preparing students for a business world where interactive technologies are disrupting relationships with customers who are participating in social networks, creating and sharing content, and building relationships with each other (Gordon 2010; Libai et al. 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).*

*PLEs can be conceptualised in terms of 1) technology choices available to individuals to help them manage their learning, 2) features of the study programme which help to formalise this approach, 3) technological infrastructure provided by the university as a whole (adequate wifi connectivity and bandwidth, secure web access etc) and 4) culture changes that are required for staff to operate effectively within this environment. Our paper focuses on the development of PLEs at the programme level while recognising the relationship with and dependence on these other factors.*

*We discuss a case study of the marketing curriculum and associated personal learning environment developed at the University of Southampton. We introduce the ‘new Marketing DNA’ as a model for the curriculum, developed through grounded research in marketing practice. It reflects the pervasive role of technology in terms of the implementation of ‘social’ marketing culture and communications, and also management of the vast amounts of customer data created via social media. These developments are mirrored in the learning environment itself; the move from one-way transmission of knowledge to the discursive nature of classes, the need to include ‘live’ material in reading lists and the use of social media within the classroom, for example via live tweeting.*

*Although we received positive feedback from students, only a few really ‘bought in’ to the integral role of the PLE in the learning process and went on to sustain the recommended activities throughout their course. The success stories, can, however, be drawn upon to inspire next year’s cohort. Our experience suggests that continual reinforcement throughout the programme of study is necessary to counteract entrenched student expectations of, and staff preference for, a more traditional learning experience.*

**Key Words**

Marketing Education, Social Media, Learning Environment, Technology-enhanced learning.

**Introduction**

This paper evaluates how marketing education should respond to the social media phenomenon, in terms of developing both appropriate curriculum content and the supportive personal learning environments (PLEs) made possible by these developments in technology.

Social media can be defined as the *‘group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’* (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). These technologies include social networks, discussion forums, wikis, microblogs and blogs. Businesses that are embracing the immense potential of ‘social media’ technologies are best placed to gain competitive advantage. As educators we should be preparing students for a rapidly changing business world where interactive technologies are disrupting the management of relationships with customers and colleagues (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Customers are participating in social networks, creating and sharing content, and building relationships with each other (Gordon 2010; Libai et al. 2010).

PLEs can be conceptualised in terms of 1) the technology choices available to individuals to help them manage their learning, 2) the features of the study programme which help to formalise this approach, 3) the technological infrastructure provided by the university as a whole (ie providing adequate wifi, secure web access etc) and 4) the culture changes that are required for staff to operate effectively within this environment. Our paper focuses on the development of PLEs at the programme level while recognising their relationship with and dependence on these other factors.

We discuss a case study of the new marketing curriculum and personal learning environment developed at the University of Southampton. We introduce the ‘new Marketing DNA’ as a model for the curriculum which was developed through grounded research in marketing practice. It reflects the pervasive role of technology in terms of the implementation of ‘social’ marketing culture and communications, and also the management and analysis of vast amounts of customer data created via social media. These developments are mirrored in the learning environment itself; we discuss the move from one-way transmission of knowledge to the discursive nature of classes, the need to include ‘live’ material in reading lists and the actual use of social media in the classroom, for example via live tweeting.

**Developing the Marketing Curriculum**

The Internet is having an extremely disruptive impact on marketing practice. This impact is very different from the impacts of previous technologies, because the level of interaction permitted between organisation and customers has completely altered the business landscape. This has resulted in the development of new communication models and means of engaging with and involving customers, rather than simply ‘talking to’ them. New media allow customers to *‘serve as retailers themselves on eBay, media producer-directors on YouTube, authors on Wikipedia, and critical reviewers on Amazon and Tripadvisor’* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010:311). These customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions are extremely powerful marketing opportunities, if tapped into in the right way. Unlike more traditional media, the company cannot be seen to be controlling the message and suppressing their customers’ voice (van Doorn et al., 2010). Likewise, the trusting environment that usually exists in social media inhibits firms from directly advertising; instead word-of-mouth spreads more organically based on sharing of customer experiences (Libai et al., 2010). Just as social media have revolutionised communications with customers, so too have they revolutionised the information processes in marketing. Information about customers now can flow in real-time, and in significant quantities from sources such as virtual communities, blogs and social networks (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). The type of information that exists within these communities is an invaluable resource for marketing purposes, such as real-time customer views, preferences, buying behaviours and much more (Mathwick et al., 2008; Trusov et al., 2009).

It is fair to say that marketing education has been slow to react to these disruptive changes in marketing practice. There has been an ongoing debate about the gap between marketing education and marketing practice is too wide (e.g. Kelley and Gaedeke, 1990; Lamont and Friedman, 1997; Smart et al., 1999; Lamb et al., 1995; Gray et al., 2007; Treleaven and Voola, 2008; Tregear et al., 2010). Marketing employers have raised concerns that research is perceived as being abstract and irrelevant to marketing in practice. As most academics’ teaching is based on their research, this creates a cyclical problem (Ankers and Brennan, 2002; Gray et al., 2007). Employers do seem to hold the experience-based fear that marketing education is too theoretical and not practical enough because conceptual discussions take precedence over the development of softer or transferable skills (Gray et al., 2007; Catterall et al., 2002).

Based on research carried out among marketing managers and students in New Zealand, the skills required to be an effective marketing manager are strategic thinking, leadership and management, and a knowledge of strategic planning, product and brand management, communication and promotion, and consumer behaviour (Gray et al., 2007). Marketing managers also emphasised the importance of business-to-business and services marketing, which students tended to view as less important. Managers considered a willingness to learn and good interpersonal skills were as important as marketing knowledge -and lacking in many graduates (Gray et al., 2007; Kelley and Bridges, 2005). Other research has emphasised the need to integrate key employability-related skills into marketing modules (Davis et al., 2002). This includes building employability skills development into assessment (Treleaven and Voola, 2008), introducing separate ‘professional/career skills’ modules (Kelley and Bridges, 2005) and making students study more modules outside the business school to broaden their horizons (Pharr and Morris, 1997).

To sum up, the general consensus is that marketing education needs to be closer and more responsive to the changing needs of practitioners (Boddy, 2007; Gray et al., 2007; Tregear et al., 2010). Although there are varying views about the fundamental role of education, which is a debate for another paper, here we adopt the position that marketing education must respond to the needs of its stakeholders who, in the main, are marketing practitioners. Thus, we must teach the skills that are required of marketing practitioners in the 21st century (Bruce and Schoenfeld, 2006; Southgate, 2006; Warren and O’Toole, 2005).

**The New Marketing DNA**

We contend that technology has disrupted marketing to such an extent that it must be pervasive in any marketing curriculum. This viewpoint relegates traditional concepts such as the 4Ps away from the forefront of marketing education. This viewpoint has led us to propose a new conceptual framework for marketing education that has the potential to frame a curriculum for 21st century marketing education. The ‘new Marketing DNA’ is presented in Figure 1. The ‘DNA’ metaphor was chosen due its applicability to marketing, where marketing is different in each and every organisation, yet the constituent strands and or components may be similar and mutually dependent. Likewise, for educational purposes it allows different emphases for different types of courses.

**Figure 1 – The ‘New Marketing DNA’**



We contend that this model better represents and caters for the disruptive and pervasive nature of technology in marketing (Kaplan et al., 2010; Maklan et al., 2008; Rust et al., 2010).

Strategically, it is recommended that the ‘new Marketing DNA’ be considered as a framework for the broader marketing curriculum, which requires changes in both the content of modules and the way they are delivered. At the University of Southampton, we have now based a whole new Bachelors in International Marketing on ‘the New Marketing DNA’. More research into the components of the DNA model will enable a better theoretical understanding, which should enable a more relevant marketing education, and perhaps even let marketing theory contribute to marketing practice (Spiller and Scovotti, 2008; Mitchell and Strauss, 2001; Helgesen et al., 2009).

**The integral role of the PLE**

As noted earlier, the revisions to marketing content that we have incorporated have been accompanied by an equivalent updating of the PLE within which the students operate. The objective was to equip students with the basic concepts of digital literacy that are necessary for a 21st century career in marketing, with its emphasis upon multi-channel communications, sharing and networking as illustrated in the DNA model.

Glister (1997) first coined the term 'digital literacy' in the context of mastering 'ideas, not keystrokes' and this principle still holds true today with the widespread use of web 2.0 technologies and accompanying social practices around knowledge in constant circulation and varying states of curation. More recently, Gillen and Barton (2010, p 9) defined digital literacy as: ‘*The constantly changing practices through which people make traceable* *meanings using digital technologies’.* Their definition includes practices that are frequently included under the traditional category of information literacy, such as search, retrieval and evaluation of online information, but it also extends well beyond such skills-based meanings to issues of identity, access and power, judgement and criticality. It concerns the enormous range of practices involved in consuming and producing digital artefacts, individually and with others, online and offline. Fundamentally, digital literacy provides the capacity to respond positively to change. Flexibility, agile adoption of new practices, and the capacity to choose critically among available technologies are all central to a lifelong digital capability.

The ‘digitally literate’ graduate is a label that means much more than simply being skilled in particular software applications. The digital sector directly employs 2.5 million people in the UK and is identified as a priority sector for growth in the Government's strategy document *Building Britain’s Future – New Industry, New Jobs.* In addition, the vast majority of graduate jobs require use of ICT as an integral aspect of professionalism and performance. Digital literacy is therefore a crucial graduate attribute and a significant element of employability, regardless of the destination sector. The UK Government is keen to see universities meet student expectations, and has indicated that student satisfaction will be taken as a critical measure of how higher education is performing. The Learners' Experiences of e-Learning Programme (2009) found that learners had high expectations and their experiences of technology-supported learning were largely determined by the level of staff e-learning skills.

Some theorists have argued that familiarity with web 2.0 technologies opens up a completely new space for and style of learning, focusing on collaborative knowledge building, shared assets and the breakdown of distinction between knowledge and communication (see for example Downes, 2005). On the other hand, there is also evidence that pro-active, creative web 2.0 users are still in the minority of learners and that learners' ICT skills are less advanced than educators and learners think. Characterisation of young people as 'digital natives' hides many contradictions in their experiences, and learners' engagement with digital media is complex and differentiated (Bennett et al 2008). Active knowledge building and sharing, for example through tagging, reviewing, recommending and curating, remain minority activities to which most learners are introduced by educators. There is still a need for institutions to help these learners bridge the gap between their informal knowledge practices and the demands of study, while recognising that some bring digital capabilities to their studies that can also be valuable to their teachers and peers. Some institutions are making more formal use of these skills by employing learners as mentors for staff or encouraging them to set up enterprises that sell digital services back to course teams. The traditional model of development whereby 'expert' teaching staff instruct 'novice' learners can therefore be inappropriate when it comes to digital capability.

Ebner and Maurer (2009) assessed students through a series of blogging exercises and noted two novelty factors - it was the first time students had read each other’s work AND for the first time it was placed in a public space (unlike traditional assignments that are only ever available to the marker). The authors found that blogging and microblogging forced students to engage in a more reflective manner and over a longer period than cramming a traditional assignment shortly before its deadline As we have noted in an earlier paper (Harris et al 2010), many excellent examples of university projects like this one exist which seek to improve digital literacy and challenge traditional structures and mindsets. However, they tend to be rather limited in their impact because of their isolation from the core curriculum where traditional models still predominate. As Bradwell (2009) notes, “*The next stage of technological investment must be more strategic. The sector currently lacks a coherent narrative of how institutions will look in the future and the role of technology in the transition to a wider learning and research culture” (p. 14*). In order to maintain their relevance and foster enthusiasm for ‘lifelong learning’ by producing independent, proactive learners who are able to become productive participants in today’s business world, universities should be viewing the PLE through a more strategic lens – a process which will require systemic change to traditional structures as well as supportive attitudes from both staff and students. The case study we report on here represents an attempt to address this issue by specifically integrating students’ development of their PLEs into the module assessment process at the very start of their study programmes.

**Case Study – Developing the PLE and curriculum for ‘Introduction to Marketing’ module**

To emphasise the complementary nature of the two streams that constitute this paper, we will now present a case study encapsulating how we have implemented a new, up-to-date marketing curriculum within a personal learning environment that puts technology at the centre of the student experience.

Having devoted considerable effort revamping the marketing curriculum over the past five years, it was time to reflect this specifically in the Introduction to Marketing module in 2010. This module is the first one studied by 120 MSc Marketing Management, MSc Marketing Analytics and MSc Digital Marketing students. The module runs for just three weeks with four-hour block classes one day per week. The number of students and the timetabling of the module presented immediate challenges to our plans. However, we deemed it as a vital introduction to the new curriculum and learning environment. The module content was totally overhauled and the focus realigned to focus on the new Marketing DNA. The aim was to provide a brief introduction to each element of the DNA model in the curriculum, so that subsequent modules could explore the elements in greater depth. The learning outcomes were tightened to focus on extending knowledge in the areas of digital and data-driven marketing, and also to introduce students to the proactive individual personal development requirements that they should apply throughout their programme. The module guide contained a very precise week-by-week guide to class content and activities. This went beyond a standard list of weekly topics, and actually described a detailed breakdown of the activities to be undertaken before, during and after class. Activities during class included the usual lecture delivery but more predominantly case studies, blog/social media reviews, videos, assessment discussion and Q&A. Activities to be undertaken before and after class included the sourcing of both academic and practitioner articles, the creation and maintenance of individual blog posts, online bookmarking of valuable material, and individual and group assessment work. Much of the out-of-class activity was not formally assessed but was just as vital to engaging with the module material. A dedicated slot at the beginning of each class allowed for students to feedback on their weekly activities, and some students actually presented material in class (for example by demonstrating to the whole group what they had posted on their blogs). This served to encourage other students to ‘up their game’ and increase their own engagement to add value to their own learning.

The formal assessment of the module and the out-of-class activities was aimed at promoting the need for a *personal* learning environment, where each student could construct their own knowledge around this Introduction to Marketing module. We provided a very detailed guide to carrying out the assessments, detailing “very good”, “good” and “bad” practice. This actually facilitated marking, but did not restrict good students from taking more individual approaches. The formal assessment, for example, required students to post on their blogs comments about the module so far and their aspirations for the MSc as a whole. Through encouraging and assessing such reflection during the module, the hope was that students would continue the process throughout their course. To facilitate this, we requested all personal tutors to encourage their tutees to blog as a facilitator of discussion within their regular face-to-face meetings.

The other element to the formal assessment was a group report and, once again, this did not conform to the *traditional* format of assessment. We asked students to form into groups of no more than six and collate their thoughts about two things: marketing itself and their approach to learning marketing. This, we hoped, would enable further reflection and strengthen each personal learning environment through group reinforcement. The other activities that students were asked to carry out also helped them to construct their own learning environments, rather than be provided by one constructed by the tutors. By asking students to source and bookmark articles online, research the requirements of marketing careers and focus on the particular aspects of the module content that they enjoyed, we sought to promote diversity and critical reflection within the PLE. The feedback received from students was very positive and thus justified our innovative approach. For examples of students who have really embraced the approach, see [Natasha’s blog](http://www.efolio.soton.ac.uk/blog/na4g10/) and [Maria’s blog](http://www.efolio.soton.ac.uk/blog/mjs1g10_mang6184/).

In hindsight, the first of two key learning points for us was the importance of matching content and curriculum with a supportive learning environment. We sought to expose students to up-to-date marketing knowledge, but the only way to achieve this was to encourage students to construct their own knowledge and thus develop their own personal learning environment. Tools such as blogs and online bookmarking facilitated this. The second important learning point was that for many students and particularly international ones, this approach was very different from their previous educational experience. Thus, clear explanation of the benefits of a more interactive and personal approach is vital at the outset. Equally important is our next challenge of integrating this approach beyond the introductory module and across the wider curriculum.

**Discussion and next steps**

Today’s economy requires much more than graduates who simply act as sponges for information. Interactive and real-time learning is vital in an economy that is increasingly global, where information is the most valuable asset, and effective collaboration is a tool which is increasingly valued by employers (Krause and Coates, 2008). Technology-enhanced learning has facilitated a more responsive, student-centred approach, which can only serve to produce more employable students (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Tani, 2008).

Earlier in this paper we conceptualised the PLE in terms of the individual student level, the module level and the programme level respectively, all operating within a supportive institutional framework. While our efforts so far have addressed the first two categories, the programme and institutional levels still pose a number of challenges, because in a traditional “Russell Group” university environment, commitment to technology-enhanced learning at this more strategic level is still rare.

The case study we have reported on here represents an attempt to encourage students to regard the PLE as an integral part of the learning process – throughout their programme of study and onwards into the workplace. We have highlighted two success stories but our experience from the first year indicates that we have not yet gone far enough in embedding the PLE approach. Only the most proactive and self-motivated students ‘picked up the baton’ in the way we expected, and continued to develop their PLEs beyond the compulsory assessed phase. Despite our best efforts, we still have some way to go in generating a critical mass of graduates who can effectively create, synthesise and share information, thereby adding economic value to their employers. The variable level of commitment from teaching staff was not helpful in encouraging more students to actively engage with the online reflective learning process. In addition, practical problems with network coverage often thwarted plans for live tweeting during lectures. Previous research has found that piecemeal adoption can leave students confused (e.g. Ellis et al 2009; Kanuka and Kelland, 2008), but our experience suggests that experimentation is a necessary first step in moving us up the learning curve towards the development of a full e-portfolio based PLE across the whole School, as small successes can be drawn upon to encourage “buy in” by more staff and students. The next stage of our research will examine this more strategic implementation aspect in more detail, and also consider how universities can prepare students for a digital society that goes beyond consideration of employability in the digital economy, to cover the broader issues of participation, social justice, personal safety, ethical behaviours, managing identity and reputation.

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