FOSTERING STUDENTS' INTEREST FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - THE CASE OF GRENOBLE DIGITAL MARKETING BOOTCAMP

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Abstract. *Tracking up to date knowledge insights, this research explores untrained practices of experiential learning within a Web Marketing community of users (Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp) in order to discover new perceived benefits of the simulation and gamification. Mobilising Web Marketing techniques to support and guide students' interest through experiential learning toward intelligent structuring of the knowledge acquisition process, the field-tested research ensures students fitting of perceived benefits to observable ones, enhancing students' reactivity upon future business anticipate complexity. The authors declare the current research ambition as an innovative contribution to experiential learning toward Information Systems Design, grounded on Web Marketing technological rules.*

Keywords*: experiential learning; Web marketing; simulation; gamification; bootcamp.*

Introduction

Practicing Web Marketing supposes to know how to mobilize a set of techniques such as Search Engine Optimization, Search Engine Advertising or emailing campaigns. Students as futures marketers have to be consciously prepared in order to be able to cope with the complexity of Web marketing issues. Effective training can be made by Experiential Learning approaches which focus on experimentation in real-life situations. Serious games especially simulation, allows participants to experiment business scenario without risks of financial loss and damages in terms of brand image. Consequently, simulation game offers the possibility to provide experiential learning benefits. Based on the case of the Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp, we propose to explore how a Marketing simulation games platform can provide experiential learning benefits. In this way, in a first section, we provide new teaching methods to support experiential learning as a theoretical background.

Second, we describe Simbound, a new serious game relating to Web Marketing issues. Next, we present the results of the experimentation of Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp. The conclusion is a synthesis of our approach and propositions for future research relating to Experiential Learning approach during the sessions of the serious game.

Theoretical background: Web marketing innovative teaching methods to support experiential learning

Experiential learning theory (ELT) has been widely used in business research and practice. Building on the foundational works of Kurt Lewin, William James, John Dewey, Carl Rogers and Paulo Freire, ELT model emphasizes two dialectically related modes of grasping experience – Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience – Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) (Kolb & Kolb, 2012).

The experiential learning approach to teaching marketing emphasizes "hands-on" experiences and experimentation activities; the "hands-on" activities must be correlated to "minds-on" exercises to complete the learning cycle and provide meaningful conceptual understanding (Young, 2002). The online business moves beyond the traditional teaching of Web Marketing to students in two key ways: providing students experience in Internet skills and experience in conducting an online business with highly challenging demands (Daly, 2001). Although both experiential learning and Web 2.0 tools focus on creativity, sharing and collaboration, few studies have been conducted on specific ways of integrating a Web 2.0 paradigm with experiential learning in Marketing (Granitz & Koernig, 2011).

Web Marketing innovative teaching methods, such as simulation games, are designed to generate a dynamic content and are most successful and engaging when they facilitate the flow experience; thus, the experiential gaming model consists of an ideation perspective, an experience perspective and a challenging bank (Kiili, 2005). Based on the high-speed development of Web 2.0 tools, the model of the Web Marketing outcome-driven, experience-based learning is emerging, being a great way for instructors to renew and accumulate their knowledge and facility of teaching while committed to instructional activities (Huang & Behara, 2007).

The most comprehensive insights on the application of Lewinian cycle of experiential learning in simulation and gaming (Ulrich, 1997) reveal a clear understanding of what happens exactly during simulation games (Table 1).

Table 1. The Lewinian cycle of experiential learning applied in simulation and gaming (Ulrich, 1997)

Kolb's experiential learning cycles	Concrete experience (CE)	Reflective observation (RO)	Abstract Conceptualisation (AC)	Active Experimentation (AE)
Simulation game development: Design of schematic	The schematic depicts the system for which the simulation game is designed.	Game designers evaluate the feedback of the interviewees and adjust their understanding of the system.	Game designers condense the findings into an enhanced description of the system.	A modified version of the schematic is developed and presented to the same key persons, thus closing the cycle.
Simulation game development: "Rule of 10"	The prototype of a simulation game is tested in a test run with selected people.	The outcome of the test run is carefully evaluated.	Flaws and strengths are identified and concepts to improve the prototype are elaborated.	A new version of the prototype is developed.
Game cycle	Participants experience the consequences of their activities either by the feedback from teammates or from the simulation model.	Participants evaluate during a brief meeting their actions, strategies, and decisions in the last cycle.	Participants gain an understanding of what had happened and elaborate new strategies.	Experimentation with new ways of decision-making in the following cycle.
Entire simulation game activity	Simulation game session (the participants immersed in the game activity).	Debriefing part I: Participants describe their feelings and experiences during the run.	Debriefing part II Participants evaluate the significance of the experiences within a wider context and with respect to theories and to real life.	Application of the insights and gathered knowledge in real life

Recalling marketing practitioners facing real business challenges, through different approaches of risk-free environment related to gaming, the above game cycle exposes significant learning challenges, pivoting around group decision consequences awareness, in order to gain confidence in the superiority of experiential learning among the myriad of simulation techniques.

The innovative approach exposed above (Table 1) allows the design of an Actionability Framework, which exposes the architecture of interdependencies between experiential learning & gaming through instantiating micro-cycles: concrete experience -reflective observation.

The interactional approach emphasized by the Actionability Framework overcomes the vulnerabilities of simulation techniques and proposes an innovative approach to addressing learning gaps of separate instructional programs.

Being able to structure the link between experiential learning and simulation & gaming, the Actionability Framework underlines both content generation (new scenarios to experiment) and emphasizes new insights toward supervised switching Web Marketing technological rules.

Moreover, the Actionability Framework is systematically monitoring student capturing knowledge over critical Web Marketing capability areas:
- Understanding scenario Web Marketing metrics;
- Capturing customer value features pivoting current Web Marketing metrics;
- Gaining insights about current versus valuable Web marketing measurement;
- Understand the difference between metrics (profit per customer) and track (customer recognition);
- Revealing the difference between data intelligence and knowledge;
- Generating new metrics for creative needs;
- Aligning intelligent targeting& Web Marketing technological rules;
- Generating new scenarios through extracting knowledge from group skills over Web Marketing techniques benefits and limits experimentation.

The highly interactive experiences related to experiential learning methods can be adapted to meet the creative needs and interests of the players involved in serious games communities, by inspiring them to discover solutions and responses to the challenges determined by the necessity to upgrade the knowledge base (Capatina & Bleoju, 2015).

Using experiential methods in education and training has many benefits beyond traditional forms of instruction. Student motivation has been shown to be a great asset when using simulation, which increases students' interest and participation in learning activities. Experiential methods further support the benefits of immersing learners in interactive environments that replicate situations that they might encounter on the job (Hale Feinstein, Mann & Corsun, 2002). In the experiential learning and gamification contexts specifically, research studies predict that gamified curricula will become more attractive for universities, as a method to invoke students' engagement (Hamari et al., 2016).

The educational technology enables students to experience a simulation of near-real-life business contexts with large information systems, allowing them to gain and develop competencies and skills in a setting that reflects the interconnections of the real business world (Ruhi, 2016). Simulations require reflection from the part of learners, considered as being a key part of experiential learning and a common feature in many gamification scenarios and activities (Girvan, Conneely & Tangney, 2016).

There is a growing hybrid of simulation and games that are essentially decision-making systems that require players to make a series of decisions in an environment with realistic scenarios, which enables players to experience the consequences of their decisions by providing them with real-time feedback (Loon, Evans & Kerridge, 2015).

Simbound: a serious game focused on experiential learning benefits

Simbound is the world's first Web Marketing simulation which provides a unique experience without any financial risk for learners, trying to change online marketing teaching and learning, from a classical to an experiential one. The gamification platform is perfectly designed for Web Marketing courses, offering an interface that is similar to that of commercial solutions (e.g. Google AdWords); while results are being computed, using algorithms that replicate those of search engines (Walsh, 2012).

By using simulations, marketers can keep up with a constant stream of product innovation and are able to evaluate how new technologies and features impact their particular communications. Learning with simulations enables rich scenarios in which the learner faces challenges of the kind that could be encountered while working on a real client project (Havriliuc, 2014).

The coordinator of a Simbound-based competition is able to assess players' learning progress, by analyzing the Search Engine Marketing and E-mail campaigns that they have previously created, as well as the landing pages they added to their websites (Capatina, 2015). Learning from previous rounds' experience is facilitated by a multi-criteria tracking system: engagement (time spent logged in by each student, number of decisions taken, and also activity on the platform community), reach (ad impressions, conversions or number of clients) and profitability (cost per acquisition, return on advertising spend, overall profit). Participants in Simbound competitions discover the Lewinian model of experiential learning in a simulation game. Later, they would be able to apply this learning model in a real Web Marketing campaign, thus propagating this mode of learning beyond the simulation game activity.

Simbound's design of the learning experience offers the possibility to learn from consequences of decisions made by the students; they are actively engaged in exploring ways to better perform in the next rounds, assuming responsibility and experimenting creative SEM (Search Engine Marketing) campaigns. The experiences proposed by Simbound are structured to engage students in a way that leads to the perception that the learning tasks are authentic in the gamification scenarios.

The dynamic learning framework proposed by Simbound can help students to develop interests in the fast-growing field of Internet Marketing, but also to gain a practical experience and proficiency with "*hands-on/minds-on/hearts-on*" activities (Figure 1). *Hands-on* means that Simbound players learn better when they are fully engaged in finding ways to optimize their SEM and E-mail Marketing campaigns; *minds-on* reflects the meaningful activities and experiences that Simbound proposes to challenge its players' minds, while *hearts-on* highlights that Simbound players' learn the best when they are emotionally involved in their attempt to win the competition, being at the same time inspired by their peers' outstanding results.

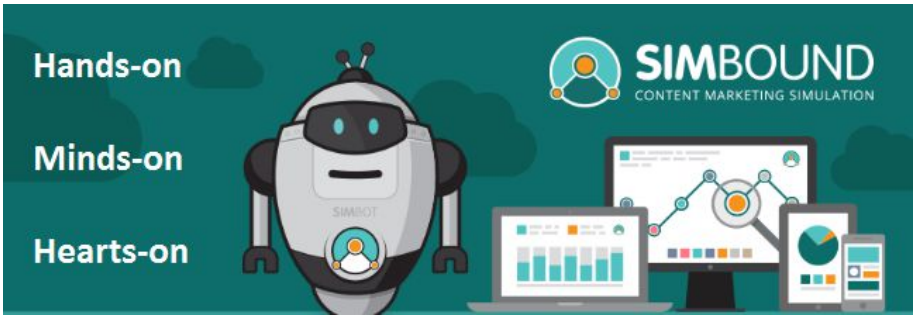

Figure 1. Simbound's experiential learning proposal: "hands-on/minds-on/hearts-on"

The students who most likely have not had any experience with SEM are starting to behave and conduct Web Marketing campaigns as experienced professionals. Moreover, the serious game content experience with instant feedback encourages multiple interactions with other learners and offers valuable opportunities to improve a player status inside the Simbound online community.

Experiential learning in practice: The case of Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp

Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp was a competition dedicated to Master students from IAE Grenoble – University Grenoble Alpes, France, interested in developing their skills related to managing Web Marketing campaigns, in an experiential learning approach powered by Simbound Content Marketing Simulation (www.simbound.com). The event took place in the period 7th of April – 8th of April and 29 students from a Master program in Management Information Systems were involved in the competition, being grouped in five teams (Bluberries, Zouheir United, Orange Mecanique, Chartreuse, Mouss).

The teams were involved in a wide range of Web marketing decision-making processes: Managing Paid Placement of Ads on Search Engine Results Pages (commonly referred to as search Engine Marketing), sending out E-mail newsletters to a virtual list of subscribers and managing Website Landing Pages (Figure 2).

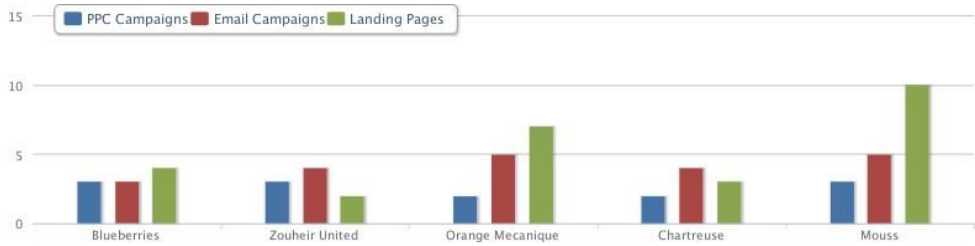

Figure 2. The portfolio of landing pages, PPC and Email campaigns managed by Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp teams

Simbound's proposal of experiential learning coupled with targeted feedback from the part of coordinator enhanced the quality of Grenoble IAE Master students' learning. As the players involved in Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp proved the mastery of intermediate learning goals, they constantly moved on to more advanced challenges.

Even more important, because the Simbound simulation game provides a realistic learning environment, the focus is on learning progress (Figure 3), which enables players to apply the right knowledge at the right time.

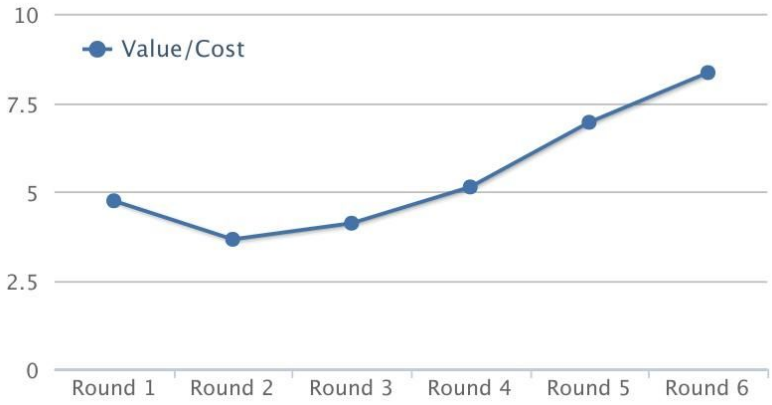

Figure 3. Learning progress within Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp

Learning Progress compares performance across decisional rounds and highlights the evolution of the Return on Advertising Spend (ROAS) or Value/Cost, which outlines the dynamics of the amounts of virtual money earned from ads compared to the dynamics of the amount of virtual money spent on ads (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The effect of experiential learning on aggregate financials within Grenoble Digital Marketing Bootcamp

The Grenoble IAE Master students' perceptions regarding the extent in which Simbound provides them opportunities of experiential learning on Digital Marketing were explored, at the end of the game, by means of a satisfaction survey, posted on the event's Facebook dedicated page. The results (92% participants in Grenoble Bootcamp were very satisfied, while 8% more than satisfied) prove the recognition of experiential learning benefits of the serious game they were involved in. The students really appreciated the fun and engaging experience provided by Simbound, which proved to be an interesting educational tool, able to create a friendly competition among them.

Conclusions and future research agenda

One the main benefits of experiential learning in the particular context of Simbound is represented by the simulation platform's capability to share knowledge related to optimization of campaigns through a multi-channel approach and trying to perform better in the next rounds in order to achieve the targets.

This study proves that fostering students' interest in experiential learning is compulsory through stimulating their reactivity toward gaining new knowledge and content adjustability assessment.

A comparative approach between previous Simbound competitions, focused on searching commonalities or valuable differences between teams, would be able to enhance the value of experiential learning and simulation & gaming, in order to gain insights for transforming the Actionability Framework into a testable solution.

Furthermore, the community of practice expertise is compulsory to check the research framework validity and robustness: content solidity, methodological accuracy and business pertinence.

We are eager to perform during further research fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) in order to explore the influence of antecedents conditions (the engagement of players involved in Simbound community in the collaborative decision-making process, as well as their results – provided by Simbound platform in Reach and Profitability sections) on the overall rankings of teams involved in different competitions, developed at the level of two universities: Grenoble Alpes University, France and "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi, Romania.

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