

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Tun-Min (Catherine) Jai
Texas Tech University, catherine.jai@ttu.edu

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Jai, Tun-Min (Catherine), "Bring the Real-World Digital Marketing Experience to Classroom: Google Online Marketing Challenge" (2017). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 124.
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Bring the Real-World Digital Marketing Experience to Classroom: Google Online Marketing Challenge

Tun-Min (Catherine) Jai, Texas Tech University, USA

Keywords: experiential learning, online campaign, Google AdWords, pedagogy

Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.
~old Confucian dictum

Introduction.

Experiential learning is a process of learning through experience and guided reflection (Felicia, 2011). It is different from the traditional didactic learning, in which students read or are told about others' experiences of the subject. In many university classrooms, faculty members have incorporated hands-on projects to stimulate learning experience. However, experience doesn't always lead to experiential learning. Brennan (2014) has argued that poorly designed experiential learning may lead to superficial learning, lack of engagement and student frustration. On the other hand, a well-designed experiential learning can produce benefits such as 1) enhancing deep learning, 2) ensuring engagement, and 3) developing employable skills (Canhoto, & Murphy, 2016). As more and more students are used to interactive and highly engaging experiences, I have developed a digital-marketing class to incorporate an experiential learning activity--Google Online Marketing Challenge (GOMC).

Google Online Marketing Challenge

The Google Online Marketing Challenge is team-based experiential learning activity, in which students develop and run an online advertising campaign for a business or non-profit organization over a three-week period. Starting from 2007, over 110,000 students and professors from almost 100 countries have participated in the project (Google, 2017). GOMC provides a structured mechanism where students can plan, execute, and assess their marketing actions. The activity involves the following 10 steps (summarized from www.google.com/onlinechallenge/discover/):

- Step 1: Registering for the Challenge. Professors register for the Challenge, verify their account and get approved by Google. Students form teams of 3-6 members.
- Step 2: Accessing Dashboard. Student can access the team's Student Dashboard, add information of the team's competition partner and preparing the AdWords Pre-Campaign Report.
- Step 3: Selecting a Business. All teams, need to identify a client business or a non-profit organization.
- Step 4: Learning about AdWords and the Client. Each student team needs to meet with their business or non-profit partner to determine their goals and to devise their online advertising strategy. The strategy will need to be outlined in the AdWords Pre-Campaign Report.
- Step 5: Uploading Pre-Campaign Report and Requesting Crediting. Students submit their Pre-Campaign Report and request access to their credited AdWords Competition Account.
- Step 6: Running Campaign. Students can run their campaign in no more than 21 calendar days.

Step 7: Writing and Submitting the AdWords Post-Campaign Report/Impact Statement. Students must submit their Post-Campaign Report prior to the deadline window.

Step 8: AdWords Certification Award (Optional). Student teams that wish to be eligible for the AdWords Certification Award ensure all team members are AdWords Certified.

Step 9: Sharing Results and Campaigns with Competition Client and GOMC Feedback.

Step 10: Judging and Awards. Google, and a panel of independent academics select the winning teams based on the success of their campaign and the quality of their competition reports.

Implementation and Outcomes

The students who enrolled in a graduate Advanced e-Commerce course participated in the Google Online Marketing Challenge (GOMC) in Spring, 2017, in which each team used \$250 provided from Google on helping small business clients to promote their business. To ensure the students were equipped with the knowledge needed to the project, I incorporated the Digital Marketing Courses developed by Google and prepared the students to obtain the Google AdWords certificate. Google AdWords certification is a professional accreditation that Google offers to individuals who demonstrate proficiency in basic and advanced aspects of AdWords. All the students enrolled in the class passed the certification exams. As aforementioned, a well-designed experiential learning activity can enhance deep learning, ensure engagement and develop employable skills. For *enhancing deep learning*, the students worked with their small business clients to explore the marketing ideas where they learned in the class. Moreover, when the campaign was live, students received almost real-time responses for their campaigns via detailed analytics. With the feedbacks, students then can revise their plan to improve the campaign performance. This action-feedback-correction loop remarkably supports the process of abstract conceptualization necessary for deep learning. In the post-campaign report, students were asked to reflect on their original goals, the outcomes and recommendations to their clients. For *ensuring engagement*, Google have developed structured resources such as Digital Marketing Courses, Professor Dashboard, GOMC Google+ community, Google Docs etc. to support both students and educators. For instance, the students used Google Docs to work on their campaign report simultaneously and Google+ to discuss campaign performance during the campaign. For *developing employable skills*, the students practiced their soft employable skills such as teamwork, oral communication, and time management. Moreover, as Google dominates 78% of the US search ad market and generates 57.80 billion in total digital ad revenue worldwide (The Wall Street Journal, 2017), the experience the students gained from the course and the Google AdWords certification will be valuable assets to their resume and future career in fashion marketing and branding.

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