Digital Disruption: Evolving Applied Communication Education to Meet Professional Expectations

Melanie B. Richards, Kylie J. Douglas,
Tiffany G. Delias, and Stephen W. Marshall
East Tennessee State University

Background

In today's digital-first environment, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, college graduates must fulfill evolving industry expectations. A 2019 Burning Glass/Boston Consulting Group study found that, "Digital skills make up around 70% of all fast-growing skills" (BCG, 2019) and Morrison (2016) described the job description for the perfect Account Executive as someone "experienced in data, digital, social, search, media, creative, PR, events, shopper marketing, programmatic, mobile, print and outdoor." Today's job market has clearly shifted toward hybrid roles requiring multifaceted employees with a strong digital grounding (Bentley, 2016; Vozza, 2016).

Although academic programs may recognize that digital skills are important (Langan *et al.*, 2019; Rohm et al., 2018), demand is outpacing candidate supply and creating a digital skills gap (Craig, 2019; Fernandez, 2014). While some applied communication programs, including those focused on advertising, public relations, and digital marketing, are moving into a skills-based interdisciplinary approach (Bright, 2020), and others are providing interdisciplinary campus internship opportunities (Cunningham, 2019), this approach is not yet the norm. A majority of undergraduate students and recent alumni continue to cite a need for the integration of "targeted career development opportunities within their coursework that aligns with current industry expectations" (Gonzales, 2017, 1) and a majority of students also believe that experiential learning within the university (e.g., internships, organizational site visits, employer networking opportunities) highly enhances employability (Pitan & Muller, 2019).

One idea to address the need for more skills-based experiences prior to graduation could be greater classroom application of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which involves learning through applied experiences (Kolb, 1984). ELT involves a four-step process: having a concrete experience, reflecting on that experience, developing abstract conceptualizations, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). Though many institutions of higher learning encourage students to reflect on past experiences and develop abstract conceptualizations, less incorporate skills obtained through real-world learning experiences with active experimentation into course curriculum (Munk, 2016).

Study Goals and Method

The purpose of this study was to discover what universities can do to better enable students' success in the applied communication field. More specifically, the study originated *to inform program evolution within the authors' own institution*. This study used an IRB-approved interview method based on the crite-

ria of an accrediting body, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC), to concurrently examine if the values of higher education organizations match with the needs of applied communication professionals.

Research Questions

Based upon supporting literature and our research goals, the following research questions were examined:

RQ1: What are practitioners' perspectives regarding the educational preparation of recent graduates as they enter into the industry?

RQ2: In relation to the ACEJMC's values and competencies (expected as student learning outcomes for program accreditation), are there gaps between the accrediting body's desired competencies and industry practitioners' expectations for applied communication roles?

Study Design

The study method consisted of qualitative interviews, each approximately 30 minutes in length, conducted remotely via Webex online conferencing with 12 media and communication professionals. The interview discussion guide was framed in the ACEJMC values and competencies expected from communication professionals. The guide was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB) on July 21, 2016 and interviews were conducted throughout Spring 2017.

Respondents represented various applied communication fields including advertising, public relations, and digital marketing and were recruited as a convenience sample through the department's email network of industry professionals, including both alumni and other external advisors. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later hand coded by two researchers for strong intercoder reliability using open, axial, and selective coding methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Summative Findings

In our analysis of the 12 interviews, the following themes emerged (in order of prevalence). Of note, necessary digital skills were also referenced consistently by respondents across coding categories.

A Continued Importance of Relationships: Relationships were deemed an important professional success factor by *all* respondents. Within this theme, coded concepts included trust, understanding audiences, teamwork, and interpersonal communication skills.

Desired Personal and Professional Characteristics: Integrity and adaptability were the most desired character traits emerging from open coding. Real-life experiences were also mentioned by half of our respondents as a desirable attribute and "T-shaped" individuals (those with both strong interpersonal skills and a deep technical skillset) were particularly coveted as new hires (Hickman, 2014), though noted as elusive.

Evolving and Consistent Industry and Role Parameters: Through the interviews, we learned that some aspects of the industry and specific roles within it are evolving due to digital disruption, while other aspects (such as professional standards and character trait expectations) are holding constant.

Insight Discovery and Application: The ability to effectively utilize both research and analytical data appeared frequently throughout the interviews (a skills gap also noted by Wilson *et al.*, 2018), and more specifically, that media professionals must be grounded in insight to keep up with audience expectations.

In response to our first research question, we learned that industry practitioners do perceive that colleges and universities can continue to improve the educational preparation of graduates. Previous literature also supports that many graduates are ill-prepared to enter the workforce, that employers are demanding more skills from applied communication professionals than ever before, and that a digital skills gap exists.

In response to our second research question, many of the values and competencies provided by the ACEJMC already match closely to industry needs, including:

- an understanding of diversity
- effective communication and presentation of information
- demonstrating ethical principles
- critical thinking
- ability to conduct research and evaluate information
- ability to write for the intended audience
- critical evaluation of work quality
- application of basic statistical understanding
- effective application of tools and technology

However, the demand for candidates with a deeper digital skillset and a greater need for T-shaped individuals was also referenced often.

While the study answered our research questions and gave us insight to evolve our own program and

student learning outcomes, it leaves room for further inquiry. Some limitations of this qualitative study are that there were relatively few participants representing the applied communication industry and a majority were from two states in the Southeastern United States. Though this limitation was in part due to the primary goal of informing specific program development, further studies could explore an application of quantitative methods and use larger, more diverse samples to support greater generalization of findings.

Application

The Applied Marketing & Media Education Norm

Based on the findings of this study and others, the Applied Marketing and Media Education Norm (AMEN) was developed and implemented within the authors' undergraduate and graduate programs (Richards & Marshall, 2019). This model applies several elements desired by both ACEJMC and industry practitioners, including:

Theory-Based Curriculum: Although some respondents dismissed the value of theory in an applied setting, we agree with ACEJMC that it is vital to provide students with a greater understanding of observed phenomena and a solid basis for decision making. For example, in a recent capstone experience, a student presented how agenda setting and a need for orientation were applied in relation to a website redesign (McCombs & Weaver, 1973). The ability to translate and connect theory to real-world decisions and then see the effects of this application can help students retain and apply their learnings more proficiently (Kolb, 1984).

Software Certifications: Software certifications are another crucial component of the AMEN model that answer the skills-based demand reiterated by our interviewees. In our programs, media and communication students are expected to complete certifications in relevant subject matter for industry roles ranging from content creation, to project management, to analytical measurement and reporting. Students complete certifications in skills-based offerings like Google Ads and Analytics and have free access to complete several Adobe Certified Associate certifications, like InDesign, Photoshop, and Premiere Pro, all prior to graduation.

Industry Partnerships: The industry partnership component of the AMEN model has been critical for student networking and relationship development with potential employers during and post-graduation.

This has occurred both through the university's partnership with marketing technology leaders, as well as through development of an industry professional advisory board for the department. Board members include local, regional, and national brand representatives.

Project-Based Learning: A semester-long capstone undergraduate experience and year-long master's capstone student agency experience provides comprehensive project-based learning for students. In their final years, students at both levels directly manage clients to achieve applied communication outcomes for either regional partners or the university, while in turn building their own portfolios. During this time, students create content and execute campaigns that drive real business outcomes.

These projects became even more "real world" when students experienced the same pressures faced by many employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the spring of 2020, when all university courses unexpectedly moved to fully online instruction after spring break, the program's graduate capstone students succeeded in navigating website migrations for multiple university departments while fully remote. In this unanticipated, amplified digital learning environment, students were quickly forced to master hard skills including remote project management and content updating via a networked content management system, as well as soft skills, such as remote team collaboration.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, the majority of the 12 professional values and competencies outlined by the ACEJMC still appear to match closely to what industry professionals are looking for from employees. However, our results also uncovered an industry that is continually evolving, a vast need for applied industry experience prior to graduation and specifically, a high level of digital skills and expertise to be necessary for students' future employment. Based on our findings, we believe that further implementation of ELT through learning models like AMEN could greatly improve student success upon graduation.

References

ACEJMC. (n.d.). *A Guide to Assessment of Learning Outcomes for ACEJMC Accreditation.* http://www.acejmc.org/resources/acejmc-guide-to-assessment/

Boston Consulting Group (BCG). (2019). *What's Trending in Jobs and Skills.* https://www.bcg.com/publications/2019/what-is-trending-jobs-skills

Bentley University. (2016). *The Time for the Hybrid Job is Now.* http://www.bentley.edu/prepared/time-for-hybrid-job

Bright, A. (2020). Journalism Curriculum Frameworks Shift Toward Skills, Interdisciplinarity. *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication, 10*(1), 1-7.

Craig, R. (2019). America's Skills Gap: Why It's Real, and Why It Matters. Progressive Policy Institute.

Cunningham, K.N. (2019). Experimenting with Experiential Internships: Using Iteration and Feedback in Digital and Social Media. *Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication, 9* (2), 46-50.

Fernandez, J. (2014, July 7). *How the 'Digital Skills Gap' Bleeds $1.3 Trillion a Year From US Businesses.* https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/235366

Gonzales, M. (2017). "Examining institutional career preparation: student perceptions of their workplace readiness and the role of the university in student career development." *Theses and Dissertations.* 768. https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/etd/768

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine de Gruyter.

Hickman, C. (2014). *Creating T-Shaped Professionals.* https://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/continuing-and-online-education-forum/studies/2014/t-shaped-professionals

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D. A. (2008). Chapter 3: Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development. Management. *The Sage Handbook of Management Learning, Education, and Development.* 42-68.

Langan, R., Cowley, S., & Nguyen, C. (2019). The State of Digital Marketing in Academia: An Examination of Marketing Curriculum's Response to Digital Disruption. *Journal of Marketing Education, 41(1),* 32-46. https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475318823849

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods.* Sage.

McCombs, M., & Weaver, D. (1973, April). Paper presented at the meeting of the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Assn., Montreal, Canada.

Morrison., M. (2016, May 02). *How Account Management Was Reborn.* http://adage.com/article/agency-news/dad-s-account-man/303804/

Munk, J. (2016, May 8). *Universities can't solve our skills gap problem, because they caused it.* https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/08/universities-cant-solve-our-skills-gap-problem-because-they-caused-it/

Pitan, O.S. & Muller, C. (2019). University reputation and undergraduates' self-perceived employability: mediating influence of experiential learning activities. *Higher Education Research & Development, 38(6),* 1269-1284, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2019.1634678

Richards, M., & Marshall, S. (2019). Experiential Learning Theory in Digital Marketing Communication: Application and Outcomes of the Applied Marketing & Media Education Norm (AMEN). *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness, 13*(1). https://doi.org/10.33423/jmdc.v13i1.684

Rohm, A.J., Stefl, M., & Saint Clair, J. (2019). Time for a Marketing Curriculum Overhaul: Developing a Digital-First Approach. *Journal of Marketing Education, 41(1),* 47-59. https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475318798086

Vozza, S. (2016, March 15). *Why 2016 Is The Year Of The Hybrid Job.* https://www.fastcompany.com/3057619/the-future-of-work/why-2016-is-the-year-of-the-hybrid-job

Wilson, E.J., McCabe, C. & Smith, R.S. (2018) Curriculum Innovation for Marketing Analytics, *Marketing Education Review,* 28:1, 52-66, DOI: 10.1080/10528008.2017.1419431

The authors serve as current professors or are alumna of East Tennessee State University's Department of Media & Communication. Melanie B. Richards, Ph.D. (corresponding author, richardsmb@etsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor and also serves as Associate Chair for the department. Melanie has worked in audience insights for more than 20 years and continues to do so through her LLC, Thought Catalyst. Kylie Douglas (B.S.) studied with the department as an undergraduate honors student and has since worked across industries as a Digital Project Manager and Digital Analyst. Tiffany Delias (M.A.) graduated from the department's Brand & Media Strategy program and is currently a Digital Marketing Specialist for Ballad Health, a 29 county healthcare system in the Appalachian Highlands. Stephen W. Marshall, Ph.D. serves as both a professor in the department and marketing consultant.