



Preparing Our Students for the Multichannel Retailing World

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Dynamics of retailing has been changing rapidly in the last decade with the rise of ecommerce. In response, multichannel retailing education has been penetrating in the fashion curriculum. Although current class textbooks (Diamond et. al, 2015) and lectures help set the curriculum in motion, there is a lack of educational literature on the experiential learning practices in the multichannel retailing classes. The purpose of this paper is to introduce an experiential learning group project that complements the current multichannel textbooks and lectures to prepare the students for the multichannel retailing world. This project can be adopted by any retailing classes involving the discussion of multichannel retailing to better prepare them for future careers in the emerging multichannel retailing world.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was used to record the transformations which occurred from the student's experience relevant to preparing students for careers in multichannel retailing. The process explains how knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, which includes four sequential learning modes, including the concrete experience (actual experience serving as the basis for observations and reflections), reflective observation (reviewing and reflecting on the experience), abstract conceptualization (forming new ideas based on their past and new experiences) and active experimentation (actively creating new experiences) (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The instructor created a semester-long experiential learning group project which involved students' development of an online presence for brick and mortar stores, including mock email promotions, Facebook posts and a website for a specific retail store in town. Each group had to find real brick and mortar stores with poor to no integration of online presence. By working with the actual retail stores, the instructor intended the students to understand that the implementation of online presence differs based on the context of each store. In order to understand the context of the store, the students had to first create the store's mission statement, SWOT analysis, unique advantage, and future goals, which were all topics discussed in the class textbook and lecture. These individual store backgrounds helped the students to develop the online presence specific to each retail store. Students learned how these different mediums are used collectively for one business entity with a consistent store image and goal, allowing the students to experience the multichannel aspect of the business. The outcomes of the student work were all assessed by the educator at the end of the semester.

After the project, students (67) answered to a series of open-ended questions in an online survey to reflect on the project. The students were specifically asked to describe 1) their overall experience of the project 2) what they have learned from the project 3) how they applied the textbook into the project 4) application of this project outside of the course. Multiple cycles of interpretations were conducted on the students' responses (Creswell, 2007). Four emerging themes from each stage of the ELT Framework are discussed from the student responses. In the first stage (concrete experience), students "got a look at how real life retailers function" and applied classroom knowledge to bring the project to life. In the second stage (reflective observation), the students recognized the "different yet cohesive tasks" of bringing the online presence with the brick and mortar stores. In the third stage (abstract conceptualization), students realized that these stores "benefited from having [one form of online presence]" over another platform. In this way, students were able to discern what type of online presence was more beneficial depending on the context of each store. In the last stage (active experimentation), students either expressed interest in helping their family members to expand their business online, and some were "already help[ing] to expand [their family business] in order to reach more customers." Furthermore, majority of the students expressed that they can "use [the experience] in [their] future career[s]."

The paper demonstrates an effective experiential learning project, which prepares the students for careers in the multichannel retailing world by understanding the interaction of the retail channels and to learn the process of building online presence. Future plans on the project include assigning mock scenarios, instead of approaching businesses because of the difficulty of finding stores that are willing to work with the students. In addition, instead of restricting the students to creating mock email promotions, Facebook posts, and a website, the students will be allowed to make their own discernment on the mediums that are necessary to create the multichannel interaction depending on the context of each business scenario.

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