

The challenge of skill development through “experiencing” integrated marketing communications

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Abstract

Purpose – Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is possibly “the richest and most accessible service-learning experience” in the marketing curriculum (Petkus, 2000, p. 68). Yet, despite this recognition, scholars and practitioners continue to lament the pronounced theory-practice gap between how IMC is taught and the practice of it in industry (Schultz and Patti, 2009; Kerr and Kelly, 2017). This research embeds IMC practice within a classroom setting and subsequently explores student marketers’ perceptions of their skill development through experiential client-based learning.

Design/methodology/approach – An in-depth qualitative study demonstrates the value of integrating experiential learning within an IMC course, captured through students’ reflective practice.

Findings – Evidence suggests that experiential, client-based projects are suitable for fostering key practice-based skills in the classroom through students “experiencing” IMC at work. However, this is not always easy. In fact, building key skills such as leadership, motivation, communications, organisation and teamwork presents various challenges for students, whilst students appear unaware of other pertinent skills (e.g. persuasion, critical thinking) gained through exposure to “real-world” IMC tasks.

Practical implications – Instructors adopting experiential learning in the marketing classroom have an opportunity to actively design tasks to embed key workplace skills to bridge the theory-practice gap. Client-based projects offer fertile ground for students to experience marketing in action whilst ultimately bolstering their confidence in their workplace skills.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the marketing education literature and acknowledges the importance of embedding key workplace skills into the contemporary marketing curriculum. An overview of challenges and solutions for instructors seeking to adopt experiential learning via client-based projects in the IMC classroom is presented within this research.

Keywords Experiential learning, Skill development, Reflections, Integrated marketing communications, Client-based learning, Work-readiness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

“Marketing education needs to begin with students, the actual consumers of IMC education, who will be expected to practice in the field upon graduation.”

Schultz et al. (2007, p. 28).



Educators are acutely aware of the benefits of adopting experiential learning techniques to create an environment that marries workplace experience with classroom instruction. Experiential learning, defined by Kolb (1984, p. 38), is “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. However, little is known about the application of experiential learning theory specifically within the discipline area of integrated marketing communications (IMC). This is surprising as the IMC context appears most conducive to the application of theory to practice, given that IMC emerged as a practice-first discipline (Schultz *et al.*, 2007; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). In this vein, Petkus (2000, p. 68) acknowledges that IMC is possibly “the richest and most accessible service-learning experience” in the marketing curriculum. Yet, despite this recognition, scholars and practitioners continue to lament the pronounced theory-practice gap between how IMC is taught and the practice of it in industry (Kerr and Kelly, 2017).

Experiential learning is an encompassing theoretical framework that integrates learning, discovery and involvement (Kolb, 1984) using applied and/or practice-based techniques such as case studies, internships, simulations, role playing and client-based projects (Canhoto and Murphy, 2016; Shanahan *et al.*, 2021; Monteiro *et al.*, 2021). Through such techniques students “*learn-by-doing*”, applying their knowledge to real world problems (Ritter *et al.*, 2018; Carter, 2013). This research presents an in-depth qualitative study using experiential learning through client-based projects to enable students to develop work-ready IMC skills (Tofighi, 2022). Using reflections, we gather student perceptions of how their exposure to client-based projects affects their skill development (Gravois *et al.*, 2017). Reflection is viewed by Schlichting and Fox (2015, p. 312) as a process “which values the students’ experiences, learning processes and evidence” and leads to the development of higher-order critical thinking (Dahl *et al.*, 2018; Radovic *et al.*, 2023). Research has shown that students’ perceptions of their own skill development is an important marker of their competencies (Honea *et al.*, 2017; Ewing and Ewing, 2017) and thus can act as a bridge to transition marketing students to future marketing practitioners. Based on emergent findings, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the area of skill development and experiential learning to address the on-going IMC theory-practice gap. First, we explore the role of experiential learning within the context of IMC. Second, this research captures an understanding of students’ practice-based skills gained through experiencing IMC in the classroom. We reinforce the importance of embedding the development of key practice skills into curriculum learning objectives. Finally, we provide an overview of challenges and solutions for instructors seeking to adopt experiential learning via client-based projects in the IMC classroom.

“Experiencing” marketing in the classroom

Current discussions in the marketing education literature challenge curriculum design to go further in preparing our students for the workplace (Rohm *et al.*, 2019; Elam and Spotts, 2004), calling on educators “to maximise student’s potential on assessments that encourage the skills necessary for success at university and in their lives” (Kearney, 2013, p. 878). Livas and Karali (2023, p. 759) suggest that the performance of students can be “greatly affected” by the actual teaching and assessment methods adopted by educators. Experiential learning tasks are useful exercises in exposing students to the demands, pressures and intricacies of problem-solving in a real-world career context. Client-based projects enable students to gain tacit knowledge of the workplace by leveraging what they have learned in the classroom (Shanahan *et al.*, 2021). Client-based projects can also support student achievement of learning outcomes by enhancing both the authenticity and realism of an assessment task (Macht and Ball, 2016; Tofighi, 2022).

However, preparing graduates for the marketing workplace is not necessarily an easy task as graduates are entering “a very different [working] world” (Monteiro *et al.*, 2021, p. 164)

replete with constant change. [Kitchen et al. \(2004\)](#), [Schultz et al. \(2007\)](#) and others have identified a growing gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills in marketing curricula, calling on educators to redress this balance as “core skills are deemed as important to career success as content knowledge” ([Lamb et al., 1995](#), p. 10; [Schlee and Karns, 2017](#)). To date however, the theory-practice gap remains stubbornly evident ([McArthur et al., 2017](#); [Bacon, 2017](#)), particularly in the IMC context ([Kerr, 2009](#)) to which we now turn.

IMC as a study context

IMC provides a unique context for this study as it emphasises the importance of the integration of marketing communications theory and practical application within an organisational setting. IMC originated as a stand-alone topic in the mid-1990s, considered by key scholars at the time as “a new direction in marketing” ([Schultz, 1996](#); [Kitchen, 1999](#)). [Schultz et al. \(2007\)](#), p. 29) noted that IMC syllabi differ from traditional curricula in that it “tends to be very tactically oriented. That is, it appears to be very ‘hands-on’ and ‘how-to’, almost to the point of being approached as a trade or a craft”. Going further, [Ots and Nyilasy \(2017\)](#), p. 491) recognise this practice-focussed orientation, proposing that IMC “theory should evolve by understanding IMC through the eyes of practitioners in their everyday ‘practices’”. In fact, many commentators acknowledge that in the case of IMC, practice has evolved far ahead of theory ([Schultz et al., 2007](#)).

As such, an IMC course provides a ripe experiential learning environment to combine theory and practice. [Kerr and Kelly \(2017\)](#) note that employers are becoming more demanding in seeking graduates with broad skills and expertise in *integrating* marketing communications, otherwise graduates may be ill-equipped to handle the requirements of working in future corporate marketing roles. However, there appears to be a disconnect between the “ideals” of IMC theory and its various interpretations and practices in the “real world”. Practitioners and academics are in general agreement that IMC are not merely assets, they are not something that companies “have”, but rather “something that people do” ([Johnson et al., 2007](#), p. 3). Beyond this however, there is a tension evident in the literature on two fronts: first, academics lament that whilst IMC at a theoretical level is considered a strategic endeavour, its real-world applications “focus almost entirely on tactical activities” ([Kerr et al., 2008](#), p. 516; [Kerr and Kelly, 2017](#)). Second, industry leaders in the field believe that academics “lack specific knowledge and expertise” in IMC and are “largely out of touch with current practice” ([Kerr and Kelly, 2017](#); [Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014](#)).

In light of these challenges, it is pertinent to try to close the gap between IMC theorising and practice by integrating theory *with* practice in the contemporary marketing classroom, through adopting an experiential learning approach to IMC. Setting this study in the IMC context facilitates the development of students’ competency-based skill sets and problem-solving capabilities akin to those desired of marketing practitioners in the “real world”. Applying experiential learning to the IMC context requires students to develop a certain skillset to complement their discipline knowledge ([Kerr, 2009](#)). Pertinent skills include time management, leadership, teamwork, organisation, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving within pressurised situations ([GradIreland, 2018](#); [Azevedo et al., 2012](#)). Such skills are considered significant sources of competitive advantage in today’s job market ([Krskova et al., 2021](#)), as graduates must keep pace with increasing employer demands for the modern practice of marketing ([McQuillan et al., 2021](#)). Through a variety of practitioner-informed experiential learning activities in IMC, students are challenged to not only advance their academic knowledge, but to craft their tacit knowledge and hone their skills and capabilities in order to enrich their work-readiness. Marrying IMC theory with practice-focussed learning enables educators to pursue this aim.

Research design and method

This research was carried out in an undergraduate IMC course with 129 students, 51% female. The sample comprises of students from a variety of programme backgrounds including a Bachelor’s Degree in Marketing, Bachelor’s Degree in Business Management and Bachelor of Arts degrees (major/minor and double major routes). This diversity in student background, coupled with the gender balance, is largely demonstrative of a wider cohort of students studying business-related courses at university. A sample size of 129 participants is considered large for a qualitative study (Miles *et al.*, 2014) and provides a sufficient range of student experiences to draw knowledgeable insights into skill development as a means to narrow the theory-practice gap.

As with previous iterations of this course, prior to its delivery expert opinion was sought to address the contention that academics are “out of touch” with current skill requirements of IMC practitioners (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Kerr and Kelly, 2017). Ten interviews were conducted with industry practitioners, including those at managerial level with responsibility for hiring new graduates, as well as with early-career professionals, recent graduates and academics within the IMC field (please see Table 1). The semi-structured nature of these interviews enabled us to explore the types of tasks likely encountered by, as well as the “ideal” skill-set requisite of, marketing graduates. The insights gained from these interviews served to inform our design of suitable experiential learning tasks, placing students in three client-based activities that graduates could expect to encounter early in their careers. These tasks were further designed to be formative in nature, with each activity feeding forward into the next. Clients for the client-based challenges were recruited both internally from within the university (x1) and externally from industry partners (x2).

Overview of client-based challenges

Given that IMC developed “in the field”, the complexity of theorising and conceptualising IMC presents a challenge to educators to define and encapsulate the heterogeneity of how IMC

Number of interviewees	Interview participant	Role	Industry
1	Female, 10 years’ experience*	Marketing manager	Retail
2	Male, 5 years’ experience*	E-commerce manager	Retail
3	Female, 15 years’ experience*	Communications manager	Social enterprise
4	Male, 25 years’ experience*	Management professional	Creative communications
5	Female, 3 years’ experience	Marketing executive	Retail
6	Female, 1 years’ experience	Marketing graduate in e-commerce	Consumer goods
7	Female, 10 years’ experience*	Marketing manager	Construction
8	Male, 6 years’ experience	Marketing educator/academic	Education
9	Female, 15 years’ experience	Former business owner/marketing educator/academic	Education
10	Female, 3 years’ experience	Former marketing executive/experiential learning officer	Education

Note(s): *Denotes responsibility for hiring new graduates

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
List of interview participants

actually works - holistically, interdisciplinary, strategically – in practice, “in terms of what practitioners actually do with it” (Ots and Nyilasy, 2017, p. 491; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). Accordingly, IMC course syllabi and subsequent learning outcomes are devised and structured to guide student learning at the confluence of theory and practice. Learning outcomes assigned to the IMC course at the centre of this study champion an integrated curriculum approach, encapsulating a variety of communications disciplines in the planning and management of marketing communications. A distinctive feature of these learning outcomes is the focus on developing key workplace skills, thus attesting to the blending of theory with practice (Kerr, 2009; Ots and Nyilasy, 2017). Please see Table 2 for an overview of the three client-based experiential learning tasks employed and how these relate to key course learning outcomes.

Together these three client-based challenges provide opportunities for students to experience working in time-pressurised situations, undertaking real-world problem activities and working both independently and as part of a wider team (Azevedo *et al.*, 2012; McArthur *et al.*, 2017). When designing the challenges, students were placed at the core of this learning process, with the instructor playing the supporting role of learning facilitator.

Design of reflection process

Evaluating one’s own experience through introspection and self-reflection enhances the personal relevance and meaningfulness of an assessment task (Bacon, 2016). Students were

Client-based task	Deliverable	Embedded skills	Partners	Time Period
A	IMC Plan-written report	- Communication - Motivation - Persuasion - Critical thinking - Big picture	Public sector client	10 weeks
	8-min oral presentation	- Communication - Organisation		
	Group work	- Leadership - Teamwork		
B	Idea Pitch with written commentary	- Persuasion - Critical thinking - Communication - Organisation - Big picture	Professional industry body client	2 weeks
	Group and individual work	- Communication - Persuasion - Teamwork - Leadership		
C	Written Press Release	- Communication - Critical thinking - Persuasion - Big picture	International private industry client	1 day
	Individual	- Organisation - Motivation		

Table 2.
Overview of client-based experiential learning tasks

Source(s): Table by authors

required to create a personalised reflective learning journal entry exploring their experience of undertaking each experiential learning task (Dahl *et al.*, 2018), as well as a final in-depth reflective summary highlighting their perceived gains from the course overall (Bacon, 2016). Research suggests that students find this process difficult, as “whilst verbal reflection occurs spontaneously, written reflection is not a natural process” (Jasper, 1999, p. 466) and business students often lack meaningful managerial and strategic experience (Hibbert, 2012). That said, reflection is increasingly recognised as a key tool to facilitate life-long learning in the business environment (Jasper, 1999; Schlichting and Fox, 2015; King Schaller, 2018). To assist with the reflection process, students were provided with three open-ended prompt questions: 1. *Which skills did you use during Task X?* 2. *Which skills did you not use, or not use to your full capability, during Task X?* 3. *How will these skills be useful to you in your future career.*

Individual reflective learning journal entries serve as our primary source of qualitative data to explore and investigate student perceptions of their own skill development over the duration of this course. Students were tasked to reflect on each experiential learning activity and to provide a final summary reflection at the end of the semester, all for course credit. The data collected for this study are in adherence with the research ethical approval process (Tier 1) in place in the institution in which it was carried out. A systematic dual coding process was undertaken to both deductively and inductively analyse the dataset. The reflective learning journal data were first analysed deductively by two coders. We mapped codes based on Azevedo *et al.*'s (2012) key workplace skills to our dataset to identify instances of skill development concerning leadership, motivation, communications, organisation, teamwork, persuasion and critical thinking, as well as mentions of understanding the “bigger picture” of marketing as a future career. Both authors examined each data point individually and coded each reference to these skills, before coming together to collate our datasets (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Where our initial coding differed, we discussed and debated each instance to achieve inter-coder agreement. Later, a second round of coding was undertaken, using an inductive approach, to identify instances and mentions of other skills recognised by students but not captured by our initial deductive coding scheme. Again, the same process of discussion and debate was followed to reach agreement, which was then applied to the whole dataset. A third round of in-depth analysis of both the data and initial coding structures was then undertaken to generate the overarching study themes discussed below.

Analysis and findings

Below we outline and discuss the major IMC skills materialising as a result of student exposure to a variety of client-based experiential learning activities within the classroom, drawing on Azevedo *et al.*'s (2012) skills typology. Figure 1 illustrates the multifaceted nature of these core skills, as perceived by students grappling with experiential learning.

Leaders and followers

The client-based tasks largely replicated the teamwork environment of most marketing workplaces, bringing the issue of leadership to the fore. We find a mixed response from students in relation to the leadership role: some students naturally gravitated towards the role, relishing the opportunity to take charge, whilst for others the position of leader presented challenge and unease.

I nominated myself within my subgroup to research ideas to generate a marketing slogan viable for the advertising industry to entice graduates. (Participant 25)

Interestingly, despite large group sizes, there were several instances where no leader voluntarily emerged. Nevertheless, students recognised that leadership is an essential skill to

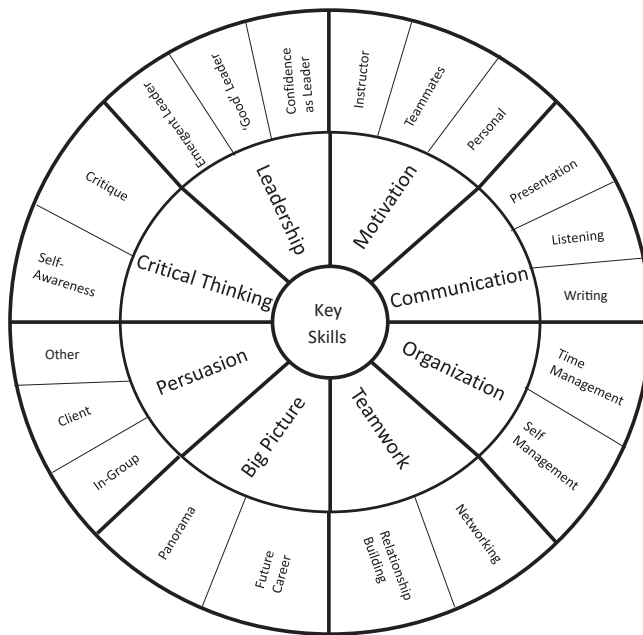


Figure 1.
Students' multifaceted
perceptions of core
workplace skills

Source(s): Figure by authors

have, particularly as a means to “control” or to direct the performance of the team. At times, a natural leader emerged, almost unexpectedly, not least to the student’s own surprise.

I think that my leadership skills were definitely what I developed most throughout the group assessments. Coming out as a leader in both of the group assessments was a surprise to me however it definitely helped me develop this skill. (Participant 80)

In contrast, for more competitive groups, the role of leader was challenged and contested, requiring the leader-apparent to prove themselves whilst contenders waited in the wings. In either case, a “good leader” was identified as having the ability to listen to team members and to take feedback on board, to balance the shared workload across members equally, to be encouraging and motivating and to avoid micro-managing fellow teammates. Self-identified leaders commented largely on the confidence it provided them in their abilities to stand up, take charge and let their voices be heard and how this experience will be useful going forward in their future careers. For those who shied away from the leadership challenge, upon reflection they recognised an opportunity lost to their fellow classmate’s gain.

Sources of motivation

Students highlight several key sources of motivation driving them to excel in this course: the instructor, their teammates and personal motivation. Students noted that this course was very hands on with no room to “slack off”. Instructor facilitation was deemed supportive, whilst their high expectations spurred students to work hard. Moreover, students recognised the fallacy of missing class, in missing an opportunity to learn and experience something new. Whilst the fast pace of the course proved “intense” and “demanding”, the momentum kept students thriving and they relished the chance to show off their potential. In addition to the instructor’s support, students noted their teammates as a separate source of motivation.

They acknowledged that teammates helped them to see their own strengths and to put more effort in to avoid letting their teammates down. Others recognised that they were not just working for themselves and this motivated them to go the extra mile to ensure that their own work was up to the standard of their team. Many students also noted personal motivating factors such as pushing themselves outside of their comfort zones, which bolstered confidence in their abilities. Students identified that their attitudes towards hard-work and class attendance shifted. This sense of personal development and growth is palpable throughout their reflections. Underlying their personal motivation is a newly gained self-belief and self-confidence alongside benefits such as a sense of pride and achievement in their work.

I've never felt so motivated to leave college and get out there to do the exact same thing, something that I have never felt in any other lecture. (Participant 34)

It's more than just talking. . .

Across the three experiential learning tasks, communication skills were perceived as most valuable for future IMC careers. In general, students acknowledged the importance of being able to communicate clearly with different audiences: peers, clients and instructors. This manifested through the articulation and clarification of their thoughts and ideas, as well as being able to critique others' ideas. Different forms of communication were invoked throughout these challenges which students had not expected. Students perceived honing their communications skills in three ways, through active listening, formal writing and oral presentations.

I started right away and I soon realised that this was the wrong way to go about it. I forgot to include a heading and I noticed that the press release wasn't structured and wasn't really flowing as a piece of writing. Noticing this I started again and this time I wrote out a quick plan of how the press release would go. Although writing quickly is something I find quite difficult, being under pressure really helps boost my creativity and makes me procrastinate less about ideas and just go for them. (Participant 62)

Students noted that it was as much about listening to their peers as talking and identified the value of being able to relate to group members to understand their perspectives. In addition, for many students this was their first time undertaking a presentation at university. They largely recognised that the experience brought out the best in them and boosted their confidence, despite initial nervousness and anxiety regarding presenting.

Presentation skills were also built on as we were assigned to present our groups work to the class and lecturer on a few occasions. This pushed me out of my comfort zone in a positive way as presenting increased my confidence and I was able to turn nervousness into confidence (Participant 107).

Finally, through preparation of a formal written report for their clients, students felt that they were better equipped to write in a more professional manner, as required for the business world. The opportunity to engage with and receive feedback from clients was extremely beneficial.

Having the Press Release unit overseen by an industry professional was inspiring and reassuring. It offered a reliable perspective, a direct window into the industry, which helps assess this type of environment for personal consideration of whether to pursue the area of Marketing or not. (Participant 84)

Do I have to "manage" myself?

Analysis of student reflections suggests two distinct aspects of organisational skills: self-organisation and time management. Students noted difficulties in balancing their workloads with external demands. In particular students had to learn quickly how to work within their

teams to delegate tasks in a fair manner. Students also acknowledged difficulties in dedicating adequate time to the completion of their assigned tasks, leading to higher levels of stress and frustration within groups. A lack of organisational skills was highlighted as slowing group work down, leading students to recognise the need to have plans in place to keep track of the workload.

I really feel this course has made me more organised and prepared for different challenges . . . This course not only improved my organisation for this class but also for my other courses too. (Participant 126)

Students identified self-management as an important aspect of being organised. They note self-management involves advance preparation in-order to be more efficient and effective, whilst avoiding distractions and procrastination. Students acknowledged that they needed better time management and productivity skills as individuals for the benefit of their groups. This often meant it was crucial for individuals to be reliable and complete tasks within agreed timeframes to sustain positive group dynamics. Furthermore, students regularly equated self-management to stress management. They attributed less stress with better organisational skills and acknowledged the importance of managing pressures at work.

Am I a team player? Being aware of one's weaknesses and strengths

Teamwork emerged as a meaningful skill honed through student experiences with client-based projects. Continuous engagement with team members throughout this course facilitated the development of stronger, more personalised team relationships. Students highlighted the importance of acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of each team member and using these strengths to benefit the wider team. This required an open-minded approach to others' ideas and perspectives, even when contrasting with one's own.

We wanted to keep our slogan short and memorable and wanted the visual aspects to be appealing but not overpowering or to take away from our slogan message of 'opportunity to inspire' with an image of a lightbulb with a mortarboard on it. We overcame these challenges by working as a group to help pitch together all our ideas and taking time to think of ideas individually in a group setting. We played around with different ideas, imagery and slogans before deciding as a group on our chosen piece. (Participant 44)

However, independence was as just as central to group success as interdependence. Students acknowledged the importance of the role of the individual in completing tasks within a group setting and, moreover, individual responsibility to the team. Some noted the fine line between taking accountability for one's own duties and an over-reliance on the team to get the work done. Understandably, students found this challenging as teamwork demanded patience and trust in others. It required students to develop good relationships with their team members, building people skills and team spirit. This further facilitated a more open environment for listening, talking and sharing ideas and a more diplomatic approach to decision-making. The opportunity to build upon networking and relationship-building skills was welcomed by students, improving their confidence with teamwork in the future.

Co-operating with group members and learning to work together effectively was a huge element of this course for me, it put me massively out of my comfort zone which I think was very beneficial to me as a student and a person. (Participant 38)

What do you mean by the "big picture"?

Analysis identified two separate facets of the big picture concept: a broad understanding of how this course will benefit students going forward in general and a more specific focus on

insights gained into the demands of a future marketing career. First, in relation to broad understanding, students recognised the demands of the working world, and this helped them to become more aware of what they want (and do not want) from a future career. Second, they were better able to pinpoint areas of interest within the marketing industry that they would like to pursue in future, e.g. advertising/copywriting, public relations. Students acknowledged that they felt unprepared for their future careers as they lacked a hands-on understanding of the workplace. However, following exposure to a variety of real-world challenges, they became confident in their abilities and aware of their skill deficiencies as well as areas for improvement and looked forward to entering “real” workplaces. In line with previous research (Gradireland, 2018), students also remarked that they had expected their degree program to better prepare them for entering the workplace and were disappointed this had not occurred earlier. However, students acknowledged that the experiences gained here were crucial to furthering their understanding of what a marketing career would entail.

Each aspect of this course has opened my eyes and given me a clear idea of what the everyday life of a marketer entails. It has given me drive to strive for what I want in my future career and given me food for thought in terms of what kind of path I would like to take. (Participant 33)

Unrecognised skill development

Despite in-built opportunities for developing a range of key skills in the client-based tasks, findings suggest that students did not readily acknowledge developing persuasion or critical thinking skills. That said, whilst students may have failed to pinpoint their development of these key skills, individual reflections made it evident that these skills were somewhat cultivated in practice. Student perceptions varied in terms of their understanding of what these skills entailed, and this grappling is demonstrated through the richness of their reflections.

The power of persuasion

The ability to engage with peers, teammates, the instructor and clients was central to the client-based project experience. In general, students felt that they became more vocal, learning to speak up within a group setting if they had an idea to benefit the group. That said, students found it challenging to convince others of their ideas, particularly in the large group setting.

I had to learn to make sure my ideas were heard even though I was in a large group. This was difficult at times but overcoming this has been beneficial as I now feel more able to communicate with teams in the future. (Participant 21)

Nevertheless, students largely did not recognise the skill of persuasion as manifesting from the experiential learning tasks. For those few who did, it was broadly conflated with their growing confidence and ability to communicate with a variety of stakeholders *more generally*, rather than as a stand-alone skill.

The ambiguity of critical thinking

Most students did not acknowledge developing critical thinking skills. Students in general do not appear to grasp fully the meaning of critical thinking, referring instead to thinking outside-the-box to generate novel ideas and/or critiquing their team’s efforts. For those few who mentioned critical thinking as a skill gained, they reflected upon developing this skill from two angles. First, internal self-reflection assists students in assessing their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas in which they could benefit from improvement.

For these students, critical thinking was important as a means of self-discovery and self-development through gaining a better understanding of why things happened and what they learnt from their experiences.

Reflecting on completed work is a great way to evaluate and improve on work and skills. This allowed me to improve on my weaknesses and discover what I was good at. (Participant 23)

Second, taking a more outward focus, critical thinking for some involved the provision or receipt of feedback within groups. Feedback was deemed important when given constructively as it was intended to improve the group's collective work. Through feedback students acknowledged the importance of being flexible and to recognise when ideas (their own or others) are most suited to the task. This gave them more self-assurance to trust themselves and the quality of their own work.

It was important for everyone's work to be critiqued so the work was completed to a high standard. I learned that the best way to critique someone's work is always to give an example of where they went well and then where they fell short. (Participant 60)

Discussion and implications

The classroom environment provides a "safe space" between theoretical learning and practical doing that motivates students towards developing and honing necessary skills for the IMC job at hand. Students recognised, perhaps for the first time, that they lacked a "work-readiness" expected of them in the very near future, and this realisation acted as a catalyst for learning and self-development. It is clear from this research that students were challenged when placed at the centre of the IMC experience (Fook and Sidhu, 2010; Macht and Ball, 2016). "Experiencing" IMC illustrated to students the complexity of skill development and the need for continuous improvement of workplace skills. This research contributes to current discussion in the marketing education literature, which challenges curriculum design to find a place for the multiple facets of skill development at the core of student learning (Hancock, 2007; Kearney, 2013; Rohm *et al.*, 2021). We reinforce that skill development must be integrated into the syllabi and learning outcomes of undergraduate marketing degree programmes and specifically IMC courses, where theory is actioned to ensure the work-readiness of graduates. In doing so, we endeavour to narrow the enduring theory-practice gap.

Reflection is an under-utilised learning tool in business education (Schlichting and Fox, 2015), yet the process of reflection proved valuable and revealing of perceived student skill development. To facilitate the value of reflection for students, we recommend an early introduction to self-reflection as a key learning tool and a necessary complement to a future graduate's toolkit. It is imperative that students are exposed to reflection techniques and writing skills as early as the first semester of their undergraduate degrees and for this practice to be embedded throughout their degree programmes. By doing so we ultimately set our students up for a smoother transition into the business world, where reflection is increasingly regarded as a core managerial practice and a source of life-long learning (Hibbert, 2012; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Radoviv *et al.*, 2023).

Challenges and solutions to *experiencing* IMC in the classroom

Introducing an experiential learning approach into IMC courses through client-based projects brings with it a number of key challenges. Below we outline some of the lessons learnt through our own iterations of this course activity:

- (1) Choosing a client is an important consideration, but not the primary focus. The main focus is on the learning gained from the task and how this lends itself to applied

- learning. Although the challenge and the client are interlinked, the challenge must take priority over the client context. As such, the instructor has freedom to draw clients from any industry sector. Clients may be strategically chosen to mirror the university's strategic plan, for instance in championing sustainability, internationalisation, or other concerns.
- (2) Building a network of suitable clients to partner with in the classroom is imperative. This may come about through exploiting one's own contacts, alumni networks, school advisory boards, university-driven industry engagement/outreach initiatives, local business communities, chambers of commerce, LinkedIn and so forth. It is important also to vet clients for their compatibility in the classroom environment. Unfortunately, not all clients make good collaborators, and thus, it is necessary that those selected be committed to the client-student-instructor arrangement.
 - (3) Instructors must work closely with client partners, building trust and co-creating suitable experiential project briefs that match student capabilities with client needs. This aspect is crucial to maximise the "fit" within the client-student relationship and to manage the expectations of clients, whilst including a full exploration of the multifaceted skills (see [Figure 1](#)). These skills must be embedded into the experiential learning tasks to enhance the work-ready skills of future graduates.
 - (4) Client participation and involvement must be carefully managed and set out clearly at the beginning of the partnership. The level of participation and involvement the client can offer and what is the minimum level expected by the instructor must be agreed in advance – clients may attend for one briefing session, one feedback session, a combination of the two, or continuous feedback sessions throughout the project.
 - (5) Partnering with clients in the classroom places increasing demands on instructors. Instructors invest a lot of "invisible" time, effort and resources on top of normal operating workloads towards developing connections, co-creating projects, helping, organising, overseeing, orchestrating and liaising with clients, students and other administrators to bring these experiential learnings and skill development opportunities to fruition. Introducing client-based experiential learning into IMC courses requires instructors to be open and adaptable in their curriculum choices in order to contribute to and shape the development of the discipline and its future leaders ([Kerr et al., 2008](#); [Ots and Nyilasy, 2017](#)).
 - (6) The final challenge herein relates to the primary stakeholder, the students themselves, as instructors must be able to handle the uncertainty and "fuzzy" learning that accompanies the application of theory to real-life corporate problems where full information is unavailable. Given that there is no one-right-answer to client-based experiential tasks, students regularly require extra direction and support than they would in more prescribed learning activities. Instructors must be available, willing and able to guide students through this learning experience as they grapple with the challenge of applying their fledging skills to devising viable solutions for the client.

Conclusion

Marketing practitioners and academics alike agree that IMC provides a unique context in marketing education where theory and practice collide. This research contributes to narrowing the theory-practice gap by providing insight into how experiential learning "fits" within an IMC context. Through an integration of experiential learning within the IMC

classroom, we have highlighted the value of client-based projects in challenging the skill development of undergraduate students and the need for continuous improvement through practice-based assessment.

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