

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN A STUDENT-RUN STARTUP: A CASE STUDY OF A FOR-PROFIT FOR-CREDIT ADVERTISING AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project is to provide a detailed case study of the creation and five-year-long evolution of a vision for a curricular innovation. Jacht Ad Lab is based on the model of situated learning as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), a framework that can serve as a response to the pressures and changing demands of both the institutions where we teach and the industries that employ our graduates. The goal is to illustrate the potential that the concept of experiential education known as legitimate peripheral participation can offer for learning in new ways within communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Jacht Ad Lab is a five-year-old student-run marketing communications, advertising agency and public relations firm affiliated with a College of Journalism and Mass Communications at a large Midwest university. The Ad Lab, founded on theories of experiential education, has similarities to both an internship and a class: a working ad agency filled with new employees every four months, where students pay tuition to come to work. Jacht values and teaches entrepreneurial thinking and problem solving. It is unusual in its structure as it is both a college class and a startup business.

As a class, it is part of the curriculum, a three-credit-hour course, in the advertising and public relations program. The for-credit nature of Jacht is one of the features that sets it apart from many of the student ad agencies at other institutions of higher education, which may offer such a hands-on experience as an extra-curricular activity rather than a course.

As a business, Jacht is loosely affiliated with the community's local startup community, with very close ties to a \$37 million venture capital firm. Principals at the firm committed support to the Jacht concept early in the evolution of the agency, finding a matchup between their own mission of kickstarting entrepreneurship in the community, and Jacht's hands-on approach to learning business startup fundamentals.

Jacht Ad Lab began as a concept in January 2010. It represented an effort to move from teaching the disciplines of advertising and public relations in isolation and in a traditional classroom setting, to an interactive process of faculty and students together building a work environment that would incorporate as many of the disciplines, intellectual tools and professional skills that students might need in their careers.

The agency continues to offer the possibility of mutual student/faculty learning through social engagement in a "community of practice," while building and managing an agency together.

The concept took form as a special topics class that launched in the fall semester of that same year, 2010. Only 13 students registered for the initial offering of the class, and they met with the instructor just once a week for a full afternoon,

following the model of the program's established traditional senior level campaigns class. There was no dedicated faculty; the class was just one course load of a normal teaching apportionment for one professor. It was a semester of exploration on the best days, bumbling and confusion many other days. There was no allocated budget, no equipment, and no dedicated space beyond the assigned classroom. The students made constant use of the white boards at the front of the room, to record their work drafting a business plan for a student-run ad agency. What could a for-profit agency look like within the structure of a very traditional program at a major land-grant institution? There was no precise blueprint at the beginning of this project, and no way to predict at the onset what a student ad agency would look like.

Five years later, almost 200 students have participated in the experiential education that is Jacht Ad Lab. The agency has evolved into what many on campus and in the professional community see as a signature program of the university. In that time, the target disciplines have raced through incredible disruption and change. Issues arising from the digital platforms now utilized by most audiences have left many programs in higher education reeling from efforts to keep curriculum current and faculty skills updated. In this environment, the value of developing graduates who can be workplace ready is critical to a program's reputation and enrollments.

At the core of this research is the aim to illustrate the evolution of an intense hands-on apprenticeship-like program and to argue its value to the disciplines that we teach in institutions of higher education, including programs in advertising, public relations, marketing, graphic design, film production, journalism, broadcasting, entrepreneurship, management, and more.

The purpose of this research project, then, is to provide a detailed case study of how a vision for a curricular innovation was created and implemented and how it has evolved. Based on the theory of situated learning that draws from sociology, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) provides a framework that can serve as a response to the pressures and changing demands of both the institutions where we teach and the industries that employ our graduates. This paper aims to illustrate the potential that the concept of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice can offer for learning in new ways.

Ultimately the purpose of our work as educators at a university is to produce graduates who can lead full, productive lives using the skills and knowledge acquired through our interactions together, giving them the ability to earn a living and have rewarding choices available to them. This case study aims to contribute to the body of research around communities of practice as an effective way to accomplish that purpose.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature indicates much disagreement about the various meanings of the words apprenticeship and experiential education, and introduces additional descriptors

such as situated learning, legitimate peripheral participating, and learning by doing. The origins of a number of the expressions include settings as varied as outdoor education, vocational training, arts education and adult learning. The debates question the very theoretical foundations of the terms; Dewey and Lewin, among others, can be read in many ways, it seems. In examining the terms, one can begin to distinguish what it is that distinguishes this model from other types of educational models.

Apprenticeship

The term apprenticeship often still seems to be most closely associated with systems of on-the-job training in trades and with adult education. However, Lave and Wenger (1998) noted that confusion about the term helped to trigger their quest to develop an adequate theory of learning.

As an educational theory, apprenticeship recognizes the process of learning through the student's physical integration into the setting and practices of an enterprise, into the actual context of the target practice. (Pratt, 1998) It is a holistic perspective, meaning the apprenticeship model recognizes that the simultaneous education of both the learner and the teacher/trainer are involved. To be successful, the apprenticeship model of learning mandates high activity and engagement on the part of the learner, who should constantly be part of the action, including the decision-making processes of the setting. It is a highly social approach; the student must constantly interact with not only the tools, but with the other participants of the interrelated web of action and consequence that constitutes the field. (Pratt, 1998) This web includes not only the teacher but also the various stakeholders at multiple levels of the enterprise.

The phases of apprenticeship, articulated by Hansman (2001), begin with modeling, in which the learner observes and considers the bigger picture of the operation before moving to the specifics of the activities of the setting. Next comes approximating, in which the apprentice begins to practice in low-risk scenarios, receiving feedback and reflecting on the activity. In the third phase, fading, the learner begins to function more autonomously, but still within the safety net created by the teacher. Self-directed learning, phase four, involves the apprentice moving into the real world, seeking guidance from the teacher only as needed. Finally, in phase five, the learner is at the point of generalizing and applying skills to multiple and novel scenarios.

Apprenticeship is built on the premise that the learner is not alone trying to problem solve and figure out situations on their own; guidance is provided. The social setting includes interactions with other learners as well as with experts, experiencing real lifelike scenarios.

Lave and Wenger (1998) consider apprenticeship to be a historical *form* of learning as opposed to a cultural-historical *theory* that can be used to view learning. While empirical cases of apprenticeship proved useful in developing a more general theory of learning, it was difficult to separate historical and cultural specifics of each circumstance to get to something more generalizable.

Experiential education

Experiential education is a term described by some as "enigmatic" and engaged in an "on-going quest to define itself." (Roberts, 3) One thing is clear: it emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process. This differentiates it from cognitive theories of learning that emphasize acquisition, manipulation, and recall of abstract symbols, as well as from behavioral learning theories that discount subjective

experience in the learning process.

John Dewey considered experience a key component of learning, "education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience." (Dewey, 1897: 7) But Dewey can be read in multiple ways.

Kolb developed experiential learning theory (ELT) by drawing from not only Dewey, but also other prominent 20th century scholars, including Kurt Lewin, Carl Jung, Jean Piaget and others. He describes experiential learning as a "philosophy of education based on what Dewey called a 'theory of experience.'" (Kolb, 2005: 193) He articulates six propositions shared by these scholars, which position learning as a process rather than as an outcome, a process that allows the learner to examine, test and integrate their own ideas with new ideas through interactions with the environment. Kolb's ELT is a constructivist theory of learning in contrast to a transmission model and places emphasis on the concept that "social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner." (Kolb, 2005: 194)

However, critics of ELT find that Kolb gives an inadequate interpretation of Dewey's thought and in fact, employs an "eclectic" method of building his theory by misappropriating concepts. (Miettinen, 54) Furthermore, some scholars content that experiential education and experiential learning are not the same thing. In this distinction, learning is framed as "knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study" and experiential learning is a method or technique, while education "implies a broader process," with the two asking "fundamentally different questions . . . in different domains." (Roy, 2012)

Rather than a theory, Roy prefers to refer to experiential education as a field, defined by Webster as an area or division of an activity, subject, or profession. This field of experiential education encompasses multiple theories and manifestations. He also introduces a term he feels is synonymous with experiential learning, and that is learning by doing. This refers to a technique or a method, an experience that is "tightly bounded (in both time and space) and efficiently controlled. Experience becomes not organic, interactive and continuous but rather a scripted, timed and located activity." (Roy, p. 5)

The field of experiential education, on the other hand, goes well beyond methods to include many types of projects from outdoor adventure to service learning, including those that focus on the learning cycle as a process, all of which "in some form or another, lift up the power of experience in the education process (not just employing it as a technique or method). It is this belief in the educative power of experience, of direct contact, that becomes the warp thread linking the disparate strands together." (Roy, p. 8)

Legitimate peripheral participation

The descriptor that may be most interesting to explore as a way of talking about the activities at Jacht Ad Lab is legitimate peripheral participation. This term frames as learning as "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world." (Lave and Wenger, 1998) They insist that rather than breaking this term down to separate definitions of each of the three words, the concept must be understood as a whole to indicate membership in a community.

The concept goes beyond the limited idea of learning as situated in practice, by indicating the rich interactions in a social web that are involved in an experience like Jacht. The phenomenon is more about learning than about observable teaching, as a "community of practice" creates a sort of "curriculum" that is realized in opportunities for engagement in practice. The con-

cept of community is fundamental to legitimate peripheral participation, with a community of practice defined as “a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” (Lave and Wenger, 1998, p. 98)

BACKGROUND

There were a number of reasons to consider shaking up the traditional curriculum in our college by adding a student ad agency to the offerings in the degree program. These reasons were based on the clear needs of our program.

In the fall of 2009, our institution was poised to take a major step, with our chancellor was encouraging increased enrollments to hit an institutional goal of a 20 percent increase in the student population to bring us more in line with our conference peers. New educational concepts could ensure that we could hit enrollment goals, thus securing resources from the institution. More students could mean more faculty lines and exciting programs might connect with donors willing to provide the additional funding the state was unwilling to provide.

It was already quite clear that mobile devices would outstrip traditional platforms for marketing as well as the delivery of information and entertainment, and that digitally based sources along with social media would replace newspapers, the evening television news broadcast, and radio as the main source for all forms of music. The curriculum in our institution didn't include any majors focused on these changes, which, among other things, necessitated a blurring of numerous disciplines into something much more integrated. It seemed to be overwhelming for the faculty to even conceptualize what such a curriculum could be. Faculty spent hours at committee meetings debating and discussing, protecting territory and recalling our history, standing firm that we must teach the fundamentals and not jump on trendy bandwagons. In the meantime, professionals were lamenting the lack of current skills offered in our programs. And many jobs seemed to be going to students from other institutions, or even to non-college graduates.

There were challenges to testing the integration of marketing, advertising, public relations, broadcast news, broadcast production, journalism, editing, graphic design, film and new media, computer science, creative writing, management, communication studies and more. But some kind of cross-campus, multi-disciplinary incubator focused on digital solutions to client communications problems, appeared to be a way to jump head first into the turbulent waters of the changing new media environment and better prepare our graduates for the work world.

We also needed a way to fill a gap in our students' education, identified by two distinct and important stakeholders in our program: our accreditation body and our advisors from the profession. Each accrediting site team includes at least one member of the working profession, and each site team visit includes opportunities for faculty to interact with the team members, who recommended a way to go beyond teaching students to perform their own role in a business, but instead to understand a bigger picture of an enterprise. Professional advisors also made comments that our grads knew and could perform satisfactorily their own particular job or role in the workplace, but did not understand a broader business picture.

Another important thread was the startup movement. Entrepreneurship was a buzzword in 2009. There seemed to be a need for a place where our students could learn the risks and rewards associated with starting a business.

As we prepared to produce more graduates, there was a concern that these students needed internship experience in order to compete for the best jobs. In a market as small as ours, there would not be enough internships to accommodate an ever growing number of majors. A component in the curriculum that would offer the same impact of an internship in a non-classroom setting, where learning could come from interactions with professionals, clients, peers from a wide variety of disciplines and highly engaged faculty, could be attractive to prospective students and in addition, improve the placement rate for graduates, which contributes to reputation and stature of a program.

Sights were set on a place where faculty and students could mingle together with mentors currently in the profession, ensuring that all were up-to-date in the incredibly fast-paced world of advertising and media.

THE BEGINNING

The first offering of the class attracted just 13 students for the fall 2010 semester, volunteers who wanted to earn three hours of elective credits to do “something real.” These self-selected students did three things as part of their coursework that semester: they looked into what other programs were doing in terms of student agencies; they developed a draft business plan; and they worked pro bono with a couple of small scale clients to see how agency processes might work.

It was 16 weeks of false starts and confusion. Meeting just once a week for an afternoon, the group did a cursory review of the landscape to determine what other advertising programs might offer that could provide us with a model. The information was difficult to track down; there was no listing of student ad agencies and on most university websites, and it was often impossible to determine not only if an agency existed, but what it looked like: for-credit class or extra-curricular activity? Paying clients or pro bono work? Dedicated space or in a classroom? Off campus or on campus? Permanent faculty member assigned as director or adjunct hired on a contract basis? A required experience for all students or an elective? Selective or open to anyone? Phone calls to clarify or dig deeper were time consuming and often fruitless ventures of being passed from one person to another to end only at a voicemail. We learned that many staff and faculty at an institution know little about offerings on their campus, even within their own units. The best the class could do was to pull together a few examples of the programs that they found interesting. One such program indicated that their student agency had up to 200 students participating per year. Another seemed to suggest that their agency was formed in order to provide a ready group of students to create competition entries and win contests. Some agencies were part of an ad club on the campus, others focused on public relations and were an activity of the Public Relations Student Society of American chapter at their school. The information gathered over the course of the semester served to illustrate the incredible differences across programs when it came to the structure of such a practicum experience, and, implicitly, the value various schools placed on hands-on experience for students.

Equally challenging was developing a business plan for an agency within a university structure. What would it cost for the college to support a student ad agency? Would the agency charge clients? If so, where would that money go? How much capacity would the agency have to both take on clients and bring in students?

The third thread of the semester's work involved soliciting clients and piloting a workflow. Our program had a tradition of working with real clients on a pro bono basis in a number of

classes, particularly the senior level campaigns class, and had established a great local reputation for producing ideas and prototype concepts. There was no business component to these classroom projects; although the client would tell the class a hypothetical budget (typically very small), the budget was for production of any proposed materials, giving students the opportunity to price out media buys or production of collateral material like tee shirts or packaging. So these classes did not solve the learning gap of holistic business acumen described by our stakeholders. But it did build a reputation that meant clients were coming to us, alleviating the need for new business development activities.

A linear process of the workflow of an advertising campaign is clearly outlined in any number of textbooks. But even in a classroom that straight line becomes much more of an iterative spiral. With multiple teams, multiple clients, and multiple deadlines, this iterative nature requires much closer management. There was quickly a realization that the agency would be a big commitment for any faculty member alone.

The students prepared a review of their semester, summarizing their research on other programs, their thoughts on financial support for the agency and what kind of revenue it might generate, and how clients might be secured and projects completed. What they presented that morning in December 2010 was thorough, exciting, and well rehearsed. The concept of a place where real work could happen, mixing all levels of advertising expertise as well as that of many other disciplines in one community of practice, came through with an almost revolutionary zeal.

A hand shot up from the back row and a stranger to us all said, "We love what you're doing. What do you need?" This was our introduction to venture capitalists.

Despite the fact that as a venture capital fund, the group's sole purpose was to fund software startups, there was embedded in that a desire to disrupt the way things are done. Those things included education. The principals expressed conviction that innovative concepts in higher education aiming to better prepare graduates for the rapidly change work world, would fit with their mission, using the concept of economic gardening. Economic gardening seeks to create jobs and entrepreneurial activity by focusing on the local community: Investing in local people and their talents, cultures, passions and skills. Jacht was an opportunity for these angel investors to test out their mission in a world very different from tech startups or software development, a chance to feel like they were impacting young people in an on-going, long-term relationship with a university program.

The commitment of mentorship and in-kind support by investors was part of a bigger agreement: the first two years would serve as proof of concept for a self-sustaining startup business, a student ad agency. At the start of year three, fall 2012, the understanding included a promise that the agency would have generated and saved enough revenue to begin to pay rent on the space within the investors' building, space that was donated the first two years.

It's important here to note that the university did not express any interest in the agency concept nor provide any funding to launch Jacht. However, the dean at that time was enthused about the partnership and was willing to let Jacht continue as a special topics class, outside the normal curriculum.

In the five years since Jacht moved from a campus classroom to a dedicated space in off-campus buildings, the agency has moved five times. Each time one of the startups in the building would outgrow its space, the investors would ask Jacht to move to a new location. This helped to create the culture of a nimble, flexible, small business and built a warm and respectful

relationship with our investor.

THE EVOLUTION

Five years has produced many changes, large and small, in the agency/class. The ability for the director to adjust, to recalibrate, to reassess, to fail and learn from the failures, has been essential, because given the constant turnover in students/employees and the churn in leadership in my college, the unit to which Jacht belongs, the director has been the only constant. In describing the evolution of this on-going experiment with a community of practice, there may be insights for others that will simplify, speed up, or smooth out the process.

The business calendar

Jacht is the traditional faculty member's nightmare in that it never ends. In order to truly replicate a real business, there is no down time for the agency. That means faculty must remain engaged year round, through winter holidays, spring breaks and all summer long. In order to secure funding for summer salary for a faculty member with a nine-month appointment, it was necessary to create summer classes with minimum enrollments. The university calendar then became an issue, because summer sessions do not include a term that covers the entire length of time from commencement in the spring to the first day of class in the fall. In 2015, for example, there were 15 weeks of summer that the agency needed to stay open. The learning curve is too steep to bring in a different group of students for the three-week pre-session, and then each of two different successive five-week summer sessions. The college has set a minimum enrollment of 25 students in order to pay a faculty member. The challenge then is recruiting 25 qualified upper level students from all the desired skills sets and disciplines who are able to stick around for as much of the 15 weeks as possible despite being registered for a class with a much shorter duration. For the last three years, two different sections are listed in the university registration materials: one begins two weeks after commencement and runs for eight weeks, the other begins immediately after that and runs until one week prior to the start of the new school year. The classes are two different course numbers, but each student must choose one or the other yet commit to working the entire 15 weeks, with some flexibility as needed.

During the summer as well as during the regular academic year, the agency meets from 1:30pm to 4:30pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. In addition to the nine hours of class time, students are asked to plan on up to another 10 to 12 hours outside of class in order to complete their work. Students log hours in a project management software product called Basecamp; this is one of the ways faculty and student leadership can assess each agency member's productivity and assign a grade accordingly.

The student mix

A goal in creating the agency was increasing enrollments through innovative, exciting, engaging curriculum options with the creation of a multidisciplinary cross-campus incubator that provides a more valid real-world mix of skills, backgrounds and disciplines.

In the five years since launch, students from a wide variety of majors in different colleges have participated in Jacht, including graphic design, marketing, accounting, management, film and new media, finance, English, broadcasting, journalism, agricul-

ture communications, fashion communications, hospitality/restaurant/tourism management, advertising and public relations.

The number of students

The first semester of Jacht in fall 2010 was the term with the fewest number of students to participate in a fall or spring semester. The first two summers were even smaller: no enrolled students at all, only one or two volunteers to help keep the business alive.

The maximum number of students in any one semester has been 36, which was fall 2014. It was apparent that this exceeded a manageable number of students. In order to keep three dozen employees busy, there needed to be many more client projects. We got up to 19 active projects that semester, simply too much for one faculty member to oversee. This brings up questions of scalability of such a program; a constant question from administrators is, how big can Jacht get? What's the growth potential? At the same time, there is difficulty in providing additional faculty resources. A more manageable number of participants at any one time seems to be 20-25, which allows for a mix of skills and also creates a more close-knit team environment.

The application process

The first two years of the program, Jacht was open to any student who chose to enroll. The practicum attracted highly motivated and engaged students, but not always the mix necessary to produce complete campaigns for clients. A more selective process was implemented in year three, and since then, recruiting campaigns are used in the fall and in the spring to encourage applications from across campus for the following term(s). (In fall, we recruit for just the spring term, but in the spring, we recruit for summer and for the following fall.) Students manage the entire recruiting and selection process; they create the campaign materials and distribute them, review applications and select which applicants to interview, participate in the interview process, and contribute written comments on each candidate they help interview. As the agency has refined this process, it has become somewhat easier to manage, with as many as 70 applications received for each round, and to have a better sense of the total number, and the mix, of students and skill sets required for an ideal experience for everyone, including our clients.

The faculty and consultants

One tenured faculty member serves as director of Jacht since its inception. We began to hire professionals from the local advertising community to come in as consultants, funding this in some years from the revenue that Jacht generates, and in some semesters from whatever source the leadership has been willing to use. Initially this additional person as a co-teacher, but it has evolved it into a more realistic professional consultant role instead. This relieves those hired of any responsibility to learn and utilize university systems such as online grading. Their role instead is to work side by side with the students and director on matters related to their area of expertise. By renaming them "consultants" it also opened up an occasional funding source reserved for that type of activity rather than teaching per se. Examples of professionals in this role include those who have had long careers in the advertising industry and established a regional reputation as well as younger pros still engaged in the industries. Each consultant manages the Jacht commitment in their own way, balancing it with their fulltime jobs or other commit-

ments. They are available via email even when they are unable to come into the office, and they also are part of both our Basecamp project management system and our Facebook group, where daily business and communications occurs.

The student leadership

To best replicate the agency experience for participants, there needed to be opportunities for advancement for those most engaged and ambitious. In addition, faculty needed help with the thousands of details involved in running a small business. By year two, we began to select one student who had at least one semester already completed at Jacht to help me manage the projects, the clients, the investor relationship and the student teams. This quickly evolved into the Chief Executive Officer role. The student CEO has become an important part of our community of practice, at times more approachable for students who may have concerns or problems, and always with a different and valuable perspective on how things are going.

In year three, we added an accounting major to the student mix, so that I would have someone to run our QuickBooks. Although all Jacht revenues run through the college, the software system used by the university, SAP, produces reports that are largely incomprehensible. Our investors wanted basic business reports (profit and loss, balance) that the college did not have the staffing resource to develop from the SAP data. To solve the problem, I purchased QuickBooks and brought on board an accounting major, who was then trained by a local volunteer accountant active in the startup community. This Certified Public Accountant is one more example of the type of professional mentor who has given time to work with Jacht, training each new accounting major who joins us. By year five the accounting major was so skilled that we created a Chief Financial Officer position, and along with translating the SAP data into our QuickBooks system, this new CFO was able to take over some of the responsibility of documenting the financial pipeline our investors require. In addition, this person is now responsible for completing the required university paperwork to request any and all purchases using Jacht revenues or donations and to request reimbursement for the purchases that must be made by me personally as director. This has helped to offload faculty tremendously and has by now provided several accounting majors with rare and valuable undergraduate internship-like experiences that have been endorsed by the chair of the accounting department on our campus.

We created a third leadership position in year five, the Chief Operating Officer. With so many clients and so many projects moving through the agency, we had tried to implement a position that in ad agencies is known as the Traffic Manager. This is the person who monitors project deadlines and makes sure each piece moves through the approval process in a timely and accurate fashion. It proved a difficult role for a student to play, as it requires holding peers accountable and if not carefully finessed, can make the traffic manager a very unpopular person. That's one thing in an adult working environment, and another thing altogether among a group of college students. It is essential, however, and the more we learn about the characteristics of a successful traffic manager in our environment, the better we become at identifying the right person during the application and interview process. In the meantime, in year five, the traffic manager selected was so successful in the role and took on so many other details of running the business that we created the COO position. This role was designed to keep peers on task, projects moving through the process, and to take the lead in ordering supplies and furniture (our agreement with our investors includ-

ing a gradual return of their office furniture as we generated enough revenue to purchase our own).

The student leadership team during year five was a very collaborative threesome that moved the agency to new levels of organization and efficiency. Jacht moved even closer to creating a true agency work environment with this evolution.

The place in the curriculum

Near the end of year two, the faculty approved permanent course numbers for two versions of Jacht: a 300 level course that could contribute as elective credits to the major as well as to a variety of degree programs in different majors across the university, and a 400 level course that could provide students with the possibility of enrolling in the agency for a second term. The following year, the senior level course was approved to count as an option for the required capstone course for students.

While this represented a significant improvement in faculty attitudes about what constitutes a valid learning activity, it should be noted that Jacht was one of several “experiential” classes the faculty chose to identify as courses that must be limited to a maximum of six credit hours for any one student to apply to the 120 credit hour degree program. Anecdotally these experiential offerings are the classes students speak of valuing the most, the college publicizes the most, and the foundation finds donors value the most.

The agency partnerships

In year two, the college’s representative from the university’s foundation began working closely to interest prospective donors in Jacht. The state’s two largest agencies quickly came onboard with pledges of financial support. They also provided mentorship in the form of employees coming to Jacht to mix and work with the students. One agency owner noted that every time one of his employees returned from an afternoon at Jacht, that employee reported feeling energized and uplifted by the experience of interacting with the students. These two agencies have continued to contribute to Jacht’s through the foundation while also sending clients our way, projects that contribute to the revenues that pay our operating expenses. The mentorship of the agency executives has been invaluable to faculty as well as to the students and has extended the co-participation in our community of practice.

In addition to financial and mentoring support from agencies, individuals have come forward with donations to Jacht. They vary from alums of our program to trusts that were seeking to invest in student experiential learning programs. These donations have allowed us to purchase tens of thousands of dollars of camera gear, computers, software, and office furniture. We use the revenue generated from client payments to pay for our rent, our software subscriptions, professional development opportunities for students (such as attendance at meetings and conferences, and “field trips” to visit agencies in places like Minneapolis). We also have to cover the production costs of prototype materials for client presentations, and we do cover the consultant expenses some semesters as noted above.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Determining if Jacht is accomplishing what we intend to accomplish can be approached in a number of ways. Student evaluations have been one of the ways we have been able to

gauge how participants describe the quality of their experience, but there is a very poor response rate for the online form. We have tried other means to capture qualitative data from students about their experience, including requesting a short quote upon their graduation from the university about how their Jacht experience impacted them. One semester, we set up a “Jacht confessional” in a quiet room and the videographer at the time did a short interview with almost every student about their experience. Those videos remain to be analyzed.

Product is a second way to gauge whether we are doing what we set out to do. The Jacht concept includes the notion that the final output of a team project when it is for a real client and real money is changing hands, will be superior to a product for a more hypothetical situation in a traditional classroom. This semester, we started using an assessment tool that will better allow comparison across the various capstone classes in the program. These surveys were distributed at the end of the term, so results are not yet available.

Engagement on our social media platforms is a way to see who and how often members of our eight different constituent groups interact with Jacht. Those eight audiences include: current students, prospective students, students’ parents, donors, the professional community, our investors, the college faculty, and the university administration. We do spend money to promote posts from Jacht’s Facebook page so the analytics for that platform are readily available. We also maintain a Twitter feed (@jachtadlab) and have a very dynamic blog (jachtadlab.tumblr.com). To date, there has been no aggregation of data from these various channels in order to evaluate whether our stakeholders are sufficiently engaged and responding to any calls to action.

Employment, where the students land, is another metric of Jacht’s effectiveness.

Anecdotally, we keep track of all of the Jacht grads through our Facebook alum group, and have a strong sense that most of them are fulltime employed, and are employed in our industries, within six months of completing their degree program.

Donor support is yet another way to gauge how we are doing, and that is usually from someone who has visited our college and had a chance to come to Jacht to meet the students. In that regard, it is encouraging to note that once a donor does see what is happening at the agency, they feel compelled to provide support.

Engagement with the professional community can indicate whether we are achieving our goals, because if we are truly creating a community of practice, professionals will find satisfying interactions at Jacht that benefit the professionals themselves, by exposing them to the digital communications practices of Millennials, as well as by providing a way for them to share their expertise, “give back,” and experience the energy of the college scene again. Again anecdotally, there is constant interest from local professionals in coming to “help out” at Jacht. We have frequent offers of tours, “lunch and learns,” and visits from agency personnel as well as those who work on the client side in marketing roles, and those who work in media companies, such as newspapers.

THE FUTURE

Jacht is now in its sixth year. For the first time this fall, a new director is in place. It is an important moment in determining whether the vision of a self-sustaining, student-run startup ad agency can continue. A survey is in process that asks past partic-

ipants to reflect on the impact the experiential education at Jacht has had on them and on their careers. The survey will be followed by in-depth interviews. The data collected from past student participants will be supplemented with in-depth interviews with past and current professionals, the consultants who have come to Jacht each semester to help teach. A detailed analysis of these results will be the next step, following this descriptive case study, for the researchers to determine the effectiveness of legitimate peripheral participation at Jacht Ad Lab as an experiential portion of a college education.

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