



Integrating Business and Design through Experiential Learning

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This case study highlights how design merged with business studies addresses some of the key issues facing management teaching and learning. It outlines a pedagogical design framework, capturing both content and process through balancing analytical and creative thinking. The students interpret and use theory throughout various stages of a design challenge; through presentations and written submissions, students turn knowledge into reflection and action. The case study highlights how the developed framework engages the students in continuous learning cycles that are supported by an iterative assessment structure and catalysed by curiosity, creativity and courage.

Keywords: Design thinking, experiential learning, business studies

Experiential learning foundations

Drawing on 17 years of tertiary teaching experience and seven years of experimental course delivery - exploring new tools and visualisation techniques – this case study outlines how the use of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and design principles, tools and activities (Dunne & Martin, 2006) played a crucial part in redesigning a 3rd year undergraduate course (50-70 students) at a traditional Business School; as such, it provides insights into how design principles integrated with more traditional theoretical content may assist in addressing some of the key issues facing management teaching and learning, for example, emphasizing inquiry based learning and guided discovery (c.f. Starkey & Tempest, 2009). The pedagogical framework supports the students' learning journey; more specifically, it:

- Captures both content and process
- Catalyses curiosity, creativity and courage (traditionally not emphasised in Business Schools)
- Engages students in a positive team-work experience
- Creates a mutually meaningful interaction between academia and industry

Theory-in-use and reflective action: an iterative learning cycle

The foundations of the pedagogical framework is based on the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), where content is linked to practice through experience and reflection; learning is an iterative process and it is important to conceptualise/ abstract reflections in order to take action (i.e. learn) in future scenarios and hence provide new (learning) experiences (Figure 1). Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2, three key activities support the learning cycle: theory-in-use, reflective action, and iteration. This case study will further explore how these key principles were addressed when merging service marketing theory with design practice.



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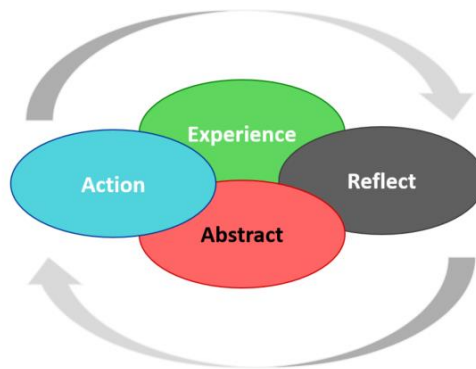


Figure 1 The experiential learning cycle

Theory-in-use	Balancing the Concrete Experience with Abstract Conceptualisation <i>Perception continuum 'How we think about things'</i>
Reflective action	Balancing Reflection with Active Experimentation <i>Process continuum 'How we do things'</i>
Iteration	Re-experimenting and reinterpreting

Figure 2 The experiential learning cycle with three key activities

Engaging students in a positive and real-life (teamwork) learning experience

Drawing on the experiential learning foundations, the course approaches (a) learning as a process which is continuously recurring (i.e. the experiential learning cycle), (b) learning having direction – experiences are related to our goals and needs and (c) learning styles as individual – different people emphasise different parts of the learning cycle (active, reflective, concrete, abstract). Thus, through knowledge about an efficient learning process, we can address our individual shortcomings (once we know about them) and become better learners. With regard to teamwork, different learning styles complement one another in an efficient team. This deeper understanding of the learning cycle and their own learning styles assist the students in understanding the rationale for the team formation when they are placed in teams based on their different learning styles; it also lays the foundations for deeper understanding of one another, i.e. different people solve and approach problems in different ways. Furthermore, the teams are supported through a team kick-off process in which they thoroughly work through parts of the team formation process before even getting introduced to the task ahead. In addition, in iterative and structured peer assessments, the members provide feedback to one another continuously throughout the course. Finally, the teamwork activities have been moved into the classroom; students are responsible for bringing their individual, outside-class activities and contribute to the team discussion during class. In line with Beckman and Barry (2007), different learning styles shine through at different phases of the design process: the teams experience that different people (i.e. with different learning styles) contribute more (or less) during the various design phases, and that a diverse team is necessary to complement the team's learning experience.

Understanding service marketing and management through design principles

With emphasis on design principles, the course challenges conventional approaches to teaching service marketing and management. It bridges and balances theory and process. A so-called 'service perspective on marketing' provides the theoretical underpinnings and emphasises a relational and value-based approach. Design, with emphasis on the human experience, provides tools and activities, and a way of thinking and doing useful for marketers (and others) facing challenges linked to the increasing importance of creating and maintaining relationships with customers and future users. Explicitly, the course addresses service design and innovation for the future; implicitly, and in focus in this case study, it addresses the learning experience.

The building blocks of the course

The course consists of 12 weekly four-hour workshops divided into five blocks (refer to Figure 3). The first block introduces service marketing and design practice, and kicks-off the team formation process. The last block concludes the course and provides an opportunity for the students to discuss organisational challenges and opportunities as well as reflect upon their own personal design journey. The three mid-blocks are the core and heart of the course; through addressing a real-life industry design challenge, the students are challenged to discover and comprehend the service experience, ideate and create the service innovation, and finally experiment with, and deliver, the service concept. Each block contains both content and process/practice dimensions. In the content parts of the course, the students read relevant literature and summarise, discuss and reflect upon key insights and how they can use these learnings in the design challenge and/or future careers. In the process parts of the course, the students get to address (through individual and team work) the (service) design challenge. Iteratively the teams go through the three stages of discovery, ideation and experimentation, and emerge towards the end of the course with a concept prototype of a solution to their team's identified problem.

Week	Workshops	BLOCKS
1	Service Marketing & Team Kick-off (1)	SERVICE MARKETING & DESIGN PRACTICE
2	Design Thinking & Team Kick-off (2)	
3	'Theory'	DISCOVER & COMPREHEND
4	'Practice'	
5	Insights Presentations & Feedback	
6	'Theory'	IDEATE & CREATE
7	'Practice'	
8	Idea(s) Presentations & Feedback	
9	'Theory'	EXPERIMENT & DELIVER
10	'Practice'	
11	Concept Presentations & Feedback	
12	Course Review & Summary	REFLECT & EVALUATE

Figure 3: Overview of the course

Discover and comprehend the service experience

The Discover & Comprehend phase starts with the customer and the concept of desirability. It is important to understand that what the customer/user might think that they want may not be what they actually need. In this initial phase, the students gather knowledge and information in order to comprehend the background to

the presented problem area as well as discover new things about it. Individually, they do observations and empathy interviews, and possibly some secondary research. As a team, they discuss and analyse the initial findings, start identifying patterns and analysing overarching problem areas, pain points and opportunities, group them into themes and create so called insights and point of view statements. Finally, through the first presentations, the teams will receive guidance and feedback. In this phase, a big 'aha-moment' for the students is usually when they realise that they, as a team, have to identify the problem, rather than solve a problem having been handed to them.

Ideate and create the service innovation

In the Ideate & Create phase, the key is to make the insights actionable and frame opportunities. This often includes an element of going back to the Discover & Comprehend phase in order to ensure that the defined opportunity areas actually correspond to the identified customer need. In this phase, the students are in the mode of 'ideating' - narrowing and culling information: making your insights actionable and framing opportunities (i.e. translate insights about the reality of today into a set of opportunities for the future). The teams have to generate so called 'how might we...' statements, conduct a brainstorm session and generate a lot of ideas. Additionally, they will start creating: they need to select a promising idea(s), refine it and start describing it. Finally, the teams present idea(s) and their 'journey' and receive feedback and further guidance.

Experiment with, and deliver, the service concept

In the Experiment & Deliver phase, it becomes important to bring the ideas to life in order to learn more about how they can be refined. In this phase, the student teams turn ideas into service concepts. They experiment through prototyping in order to bring the concepts to life. In the end, they include discussions about service models, client interface, technological options, delivery system etc. They will also need to analyse what is technically and organisationally feasible and develop some type of understanding of whether the idea is financially viable. Finally, the teams present their concept and hand-in a so called journey document.

Design practice and its links to the experiential learning cycle

It is important to note that even though the course is presented in a linear format, the students work iteratively through the challenge. For example, after having received feedback on the initial idea(s) most teams need to revisit their insights. In fact, throughout the years of course development, it became clear that the design process itself addressed the students learning experience. More specifically, the course explores the practical activities and tools linked to design practice, as well as its epistemological and cognitive foundations. The process dimension includes using activities and tools such as observations, ethnography, early and fast prototyping, visualisation and interdisciplinary teams; it emphasises the importance of working iteratively, combining abstract and concrete activities as well as divergent and convergent approaches (Brown, 2008). The cognitive dimension provides a deeper understanding of how knowledge is created (Martin, 2009). Firms (and individuals) need to make sure they balance analytical and intuitive thinking to achieve both reliability and validity. Design practice emphasises the importance of using both abductive reasoning - the 'logic of what could be' (Peirce, 1994) - and reflective practice (Schon, 1983) in order to achieve this.

This is in line with Beckman and Barry (2007; drawing on Owen (1998) and Kolb (1984)) highlighting design as a learning practice, proposing that:

The design process has both analytic and synthetic elements, and [...] it operates in both the theoretical and practical realms. [...] Movement between [these] realms happens as participants in the process draw insights from what they have learned in the world of practice, convert them to abstract ideas or theories, and then translate those theories back into the realm of practice [...] (Beckman & Barry, 2007, p. 27)

Thus, one key element in the course design has been the development of an assessment and activity structure that supports the iterative journey the students go through. The implications of this will be discussed next.

Key learning dimensions: iterative assessments, design catalysts and critical reflection

The pedagogical framework addresses both the perception continuum and the process continuum in the learning cycle. More specifically, all the course activities inside and outside class as well as the assessments

support the key dimensions of theory-in-use, reflective action and iteration. Additionally, it is clear that the design process itself catalyses the students' journey towards a deeper learning experience.

An iterative assessment structure catalysing the learning experience

In the course, in addition to addressing a real-life industry challenge, the students read and use service theory. Throughout the course, they need to put this theory in use, i.e. they need to balance abstract content with the actual experience of using it. This approach goes beyond 'just' applying theory, rather the students need to interpret theory, make a decision on if and what to use and when. Additionally, through emphasising reflective action, the students then reflect on their experiences and get to action their learnings in the next iteration. The iterations are extremely important for fuelling the learning cycle. Supported by the assessment structure, the learning cycle is reiterated and reinforced or changed a number of times throughout the courses (as illustrated in figure 4).

Assessments and Activities <i>developed to support the key concepts</i>			
		Individual	Teamwork
<i>Key concepts supporting the learning experience</i>	Reflection & summaries of readings (including self and peer reviews)	Individual contributions to the team challenge	Team contributions to the team challenge
Theory-in-use	Interpret theory and identify key concepts to use in practice	Put key concepts into practice through interviews, observations, prototyping or examples	Combine individual knowledge bases and make sense of findings
Reflective action	Reflect on readings and activities, digest feedback and demonstrate learnings	Reflect on role within the team, digest team feedback	Reflect on complementary abilities within the team, provide feedback
Iteration	Written submissions 3 iterations	Three contributions (e.g. observations, interviews, secondary research, prototyping)	Three presentations and feedback sessions.

Figure 4 Overview of how the assessment structure supports the learning experience

Curiosity, creativity and courage: design catalysts supporting a deeper learning experience

Drawing on the years of working with student teams and design professionals in the course, it is clear that three interrelated design catalysts further enhance the learning experience towards a deeper learning experience: curiosity, creativity and courage (illustrated in figure 5). Seemingly, they transcend the three design phases, as such they can be associated with design attitudes (c.f. Michlewski, 2008). Curiosity catalyses empathy and deeper understanding of the users and, in this specific course, the service experience and its context. Creativity supports divergent thinking and disruption of cognitive and perceptual sets (Amabile, 1983).

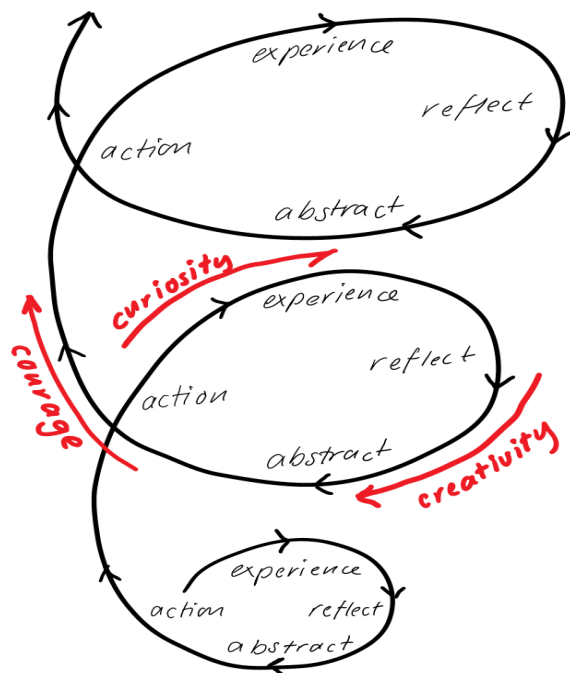


Figure 5 Curiosity, creativity and courage –catalysing the learning spiral

In the course, curiosity and creativity are highly interlinked. The curious teams gain higher empathy and a larger knowledge base, seemingly building stronger foundations for creativity. Courage mitigates cognitive bias with regard to assumptions present in curiosity and creativity-driven activities. The teams and individuals that are willing to test and learn and hence challenge their assumptions - try, fail, reflect, learn and try again - get a deeper learning experience. Drawing on a pragmatic approach to design practice (Dalsgaard, 2014; Steen, 2013; Windahl & Wetter-Edman, 2019), curiosity catalyses a situated and systemic understanding of the design challenge, creativity catalyses an interventionist and transformative approach, and courage catalyses the movement between the two, i.e. explorative inquiry.

Industry context – supporting the real-life learning experience

The relationship with industry goes far beyond so called guest lectures traditionally used in Business Schools. By involving professional individuals throughout the semester in a continuous interaction with the students, the course has created a mutually meaningful interaction between academia and industry. The so called design mentors (mentoring the students through the design process) and industry partner (providing the context for the design challenge) mentor between four to eight teams through three presentations, and give qualitative and quantitative feedback to each team after each presentation. Through these interactions, the students are exposed to a ‘real-life’ experience. This includes, not only a fuzzy process, but also ambiguity with regard to the feedback they receive and how to address it. Seemingly, the theoretical foundations of the course assist the students when questioning and challenging some of the external input they receive. In fact, this critical reflection is key to the students’ growth: rather than ‘ticking the boxes’ for industry, they are allowed, encouraged and supported to question, challenge and rethink the challenge and its solution.

Work in progress – integrating business and design

Even though the course has been rather neatly described in this case study, many questions remain with regard to its survival and further development within a traditional Business School. A course like this pinpoints numerous challenges linked to the institutional inertia of a large university. Operational and immediate issues are linked to resourcing and space, as well as implementation of transformative assessment structures: How can we ensure appropriate resourcing for an interactive 50-70 students ‘only’ course (a small course in a Business School context)?; and, How can we support creative assessment structures with emphasis on formative as opposed to summative assessments? Strategic and structural issues are linked to capabilities and interdisciplinary collaboration: How can we encourage interdisciplinary involvement of both teachers and students? To me as an educator and researcher, it is clear that the use of design practice in business studies is breaking the existing and artificial academic boundaries and that the time has definitely come (c.f. Starkey & Tempest, 2009) to further explore the power of combining the two.

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