
REAL WORLD EXPERIENCE, VIRTUAL WORLD ENVIRONMENT: THE DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF MARKETING PLANS IN SECOND LIFE

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Marketing educators rely upon projects in marketing courses to enhance student learning. This teaching innovation builds upon a commonly used project in principles of marketing courses – the marketing plan project. Student teams complete a marketing plan for a business in a virtual world, such as Second Life. The project design is based on the principles of authentic assessment. Specifically, the project benefits from an authentic environment and client, rubrics for setting expectations and assessing outcomes, and chunked assignments. Planning for marketing strategy in Second Life results in a realistic setting in which student recommendations can be executed and evaluated.

Educators frequently tout the value of project-based learning, acknowledging the superior understanding students gain when they apply principles in activities and projects. This belief is evidenced in the prevalence of team projects assigned in courses across the marketing curriculum. In principles of marketing, students may be asked to develop a marketing plan over the course of the semester. This project benefits students by providing an opportunity for them to work through the stages of marketing planning and strategy. While valuable for their ability to engage students with a realistic set of responsibilities, marketing plans suffer from six key limitations. In terms of maximizing the students' project experience, it can be challenging to identify meaningful and manageable client projects in appropriate settings. For the most part, however, such projects are limited to planning and restrained by incomplete information on what would be necessary to actually execute the plan. Execution of the plan is unlikely due to resource constraints. In many cases, the marketing plan is presented in a class environment rather than to a client. There are also practical concerns with marketing plan projects, specifically the challenges of managing team meetings and responsibilities while minimizing social loafing among team members. Lastly, for teachers, the team format inherent in marketing plan projects make differentiating instruction for individual student needs difficult at best. Assessing performance is also an issue with the need to include objective measures and imbed opportunities for feedback and revisions throughout the process. The teaching innovation presented herein seeks to solve these limitations of marketing plan projects.

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Authentic Assessment

By applying the principles of authentic assessment, marketing plan projects can be improved to overcome these limitations. Grant Wiggins (1993, p. 229) describes authentic assessment as “engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field.” The projects replicate professional tasks both in the nature of the task and the client to whom students are accountable (Mueller 2008). When learning opportunities are infused with authenticity, students are immersed in real-life activities with the opportunity to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate concepts. Activities, feedback, and revisions occur throughout the semester rather than primarily at the end of the semester. Because outcomes and assessments occur over time, teachers are able to adapt instruction to individual needs and respond as students improve.

Karet and Hubbell (2003) note that authentic learning environments enhance several skills for students and particularly those noted by The CEO Forum as 21st Century Skills. These include digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity skills. Digital-age literacy incorporates competence in information technology. Inventive thinking addresses the need for a workforce that is capable of managing complex tasks, adapting to uncertain situations, and illustrating higher-order thinking and sound reasoning. Effective communication includes the need for people to be collaborative in team environments and to have a strong sense of personal, social, and civic responsibility. Lastly, high productivity reflects the benefits of prioritizing, planning, and managing for results.

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Three components were added to the marketing plan project framework to infuse it with the characteristics of authentic assessment. First, authenticity of task and audience were improved with the use of a simulated real-world experience. Second, the marketing plan tasks were “chunked” into installment assignments for which individual team members were responsible. Team members were guided by a project manager. Third, rubrics were incorporated to assess performance and provide feedback. In the following section, the components will be described.

Real World Experience in a Virtual World

A virtual environment simulates the real world environment as students develop marketing strategies. Doing so provides students with the ability to explore consumer behavior and assess opportunities to meet consumer needs and wants, evaluate competition, establish a product offering, and develop pricing, distribution, and promotion strategies in an easily accessible and inexpensive environment. By using virtual worlds for marketing education, students can do more than read about and practice planning strategic marketing decisions. They can experience and execute those decisions. Virtual worlds bring real world experience to the marketing classroom.

Virtual worlds, also known as “metaverses,” refer to three-dimensional communities that mimic the real world without its physical limitations. The concept was proposed by Neil Stephenson’s book, *Snow Crash*, which went on to inspire Phillip Rosedale’s creation of Second Life, arguably the most prominent of virtual worlds. “In world,” one can shop, run a business, work, tour an art gallery, take a class, drive (or fly) a car, meet with friends, exercise, and date. Involvement runs the gamut from those who poke around out of curiosity to those who purchase homes, decorate them, and spend time volunteering in their virtual neighborhoods.

There are many virtual worlds already. The best populated worlds include There.com, Kaneva, and Second Life. Second Life, launched in 2003, boasts the largest population with more than 10,000,000 residents. It is a form of entertainment, a social networking site, a new market for entrepreneurs, a vehicle for media and advertising, and an educational environment. Numerous institutions offer classes in Second Life as teachers seek opportunities to engage learners and universities strive to enhance access, reach, and the efficient use of resources. Virtual worlds offer many benefits from the perspective of course delivery, but they also provide a simulated economy with which to examine marketing principles.

Second Life makes an ideal virtual environment for teaching marketing principles because it truly is an online consumer society. Residents are provided “stock” clothing and are offered tools with which to build (for free) anything they want; however, numerous entrepreneurs offer consumer goods for sale for those who desire them and do not want to build them. Second Life also plays host to a materialistic set of avatars with a zest for branded virtual goods. For example, residents can travel anywhere in Second Life by flight, arriving instantaneously at another geographic location. Yet, many residents do own cars. Likewise, residents do not need to sleep in Second Life, and so presumably do not need shelter. Still, many residents own property and have built lavish homes. Businesses like the Bloom Garden Center sell landscaping services and plants for such property owners. Avatars do not need food to sustain themselves, yet there are popular restaurants in world so busy that reservations must be made far in advance. Second Life’s economy is an active one with residents exchanging Linden dollars (the world’s currency) for virtual goods and services.

Entrepreneurs are the foundation for the Second Life economy offering virtually everything offered in the real world. There are banks, hotels, restaurants, concert venues, construction firms, real estate companies, office parks, research facilities, malls, car dealers, residential neighborhoods, and universities. Big brands like Sony, IBM, Coke, and Adidas are marketing in world, but the culture of Second Life tends to favor entrepreneurs. Regardless, Second Life (and other virtual worlds) provides an easily accessible and affordable environment for planning and executing the development and implementation of the pricing, promotion, and distribution of products to create exchanges that meet the goals of the parties involved. In short, it provides a simulated environment within which students can practice marketing planning. The result is a marketing plan project in an authentic learning environment with an authentic audience (the client) to judge student outcomes.

Rubrics

Mueller (2008) describes rubrics as one of the tools necessary for incorporating authentic assessment. They are scoring scales which assess student performance on a set of criteria related to the task. Students are informed of the criteria before work begins to encourage students to focus on specific areas of the assignment. The use of a rubric provides a type of work plan for students. Teachers use the rubrics to assess performance using objective measures of success. For both teachers and students, the use of rubrics differentiates between

better and weaker work. Teachers are also able to use the rubrics to inform a program of differentiated instruction which enables teachers to adjust their approach based on task competence among the criteria.

Chunking

Chunking is a method of breaking material into sections for improved comprehension and memory (Gobet 2005). A similar technique, the sectioning and sequencing of project components, can enable better comprehension and outcomes in marketing plans. For the marketing plan, it means breaking the project into small, manageable components due over the semester which are then individually assigned. The individual assignments are not meant to indicate sole authorship by one member of the team. Rather, individuals are held accountable for sections and should pull input from team colleagues. Chunking the marketing plan offers several benefits. Because the project is divided into smaller assignments due throughout the semester, the stress of a major project due at the end of the course is alleviated. This approach also enhances students' ability to manage time needed for project requirements. Because individuals are accountable for team performance, social loafing is reduced. Projects are substantially improved because the final submission is a result of revisions based on feedback for earlier assignments. Lastly, when combined with the use of rubrics, differentiated instruction is possible.

While individuals each hold specific responsibility for chunks of the project, the collaborative process for the team as a whole is assigned to a project manager. The project manager serves as the primary point of contact for the team with the client and the instructor. He or she ensures that the span of control is manageable for the instructor. The project manager provides leadership for the team and maintains records of agendas, action items, and accomplishments

Marketing plans can benefit from authentic assessment. The use of virtual worlds as a setting for marketing plan projects provides students a realistic setting, a significant and meaningful task, and a professional client. Rubrics ensure clear expectations on all relevant criteria and enable differentiated instruction. Chunking of assignments enhances accountability and provides for periodic feedback to be used for improving task performance. The result is a solution to the limitations of marketing plans.

The Assignment: Objectives and Procedures

The assignment itself is simply to create a marketing plan for a product which is or will be marketed in

Second Life. The plan components mirror those of a traditional plan, but students are asked to work in teams to develop the plan for Second Life. Project managers are selected for each team. The learning objectives are to enhance student understanding of the marketing planning process and to provide experience in analyzing a situation, evaluating competition, assessing market potential, gathering consumer research, and making decisions for product, pricing, distribution, and promotional strategies.

Small businesses in world that can benefit from marketing planning are identified and used as the focus of the project. For instance, Diva Style is an in world clothing store targeting professional, female avatars with a strong fashion sense. Diva Style already offers detailed clothing designs in an upscale, virtual store environment. However, Diva Style's owner is a programmer, not a marketer. Student teams analyze Diva Style's situation and target market and establish product, pricing, promotion, and distribution strategies. For instance, Diva Style identified two new product lines: one targeting pregnant avatars who want stylish maternity wear and one for children's clothes.

A key benefit of this approach is that Second Life entrepreneurs generally have the capacity to implement all or some portion of the students' plans, ultimately providing a measure of effectiveness and opportunity for the student teams to experience whether their strategies worked. The final plan submitted should report on those strategies that were implemented and the results thus far. A variation on this assignment is to have student teams create products to market in world (rather than relying on an existing Second Life business). However, this option may require at least some programming skills from students or coordination with an information systems or computer programming class which could provide the necessary expertise for building products and facilities in Second Life.

Incorporating a Virtual World Marketing Plan project into a course requires the following. One should provide students with the instructions for preparing a marketing plan. An example of a company marketing successfully in Second Life should be provided so that students can see how marketing strategies apply to virtual environments and can even support real life branding. In addition, the in-world business client must be recruited. Ideally this is arranged ahead of time, though students can identify small businesses of interest to them. Instructors also need to provide some instruction and guidance on how to operate in Second Life. There are many sources of information available online and new Second Life residents complete a tutorial, but it is helpful and reassuring to students to offer a tip sheet

on operating in world. Lastly, it is good practice to check first with one's institution on any university-wide policies on Second Life. Because Second Life is a non-regulated environment, there are "griefing" incidents which may represent a legal liability for instructors and their institutions. At a minimum, students should be informed of the potential for negative experiences and offered suggestions for dealing with grievers. The guide provided to students in conjunction with the marketing plan instructions can include policy statements and recommendations for operating in Second Life. Instructors do not need to feel intimidated by the virtual world environment because the project requires minimal time "in-world" on the part of the instructor.

Evaluation

Does using a virtual world enhance student learning of the marketing planning process? Evaluation of instructional methods and assessing the efficacy of learning activities are challenging, particularly when new technology is involved. Because this project enables students to do something "real" (albeit in a virtual world), we heighten their engagement beyond projects that ask students to work with an imaginary task. It is important to remember that virtual worlds represent a teaching tool, but mastery of the virtual world environment is not the objective. Rather, mastery of the principles of marketing and the development of a marketing plan are the objectives.

Instructors can meet those objectives using an enhanced project which utilizes a virtual world environment and a structured system of assessment via rubrics and chunked responsibilities. Instructors will note that the first set of individual assignment scores follow normal grade distribution patterns, but that performance improves markedly on the second set of assignments. Team scores on the final project are substantially enhanced. Complaints of social loafing from team members are reduced to near extinction.

The assignment called for students to submit a reflection on the assignment at the project's conclusion. These comments were analyzed and the following codes emerged: 1) real-world experience, 2) innovative environment, 3) fair grading structure, and 4) complexity. Most student comments suggest the use of virtual worlds for marketing education is valuable to students due to its use of an innovative environment and its realistic setting. The virtual marketing plan assignment provides students with experience in a rapidly-growing platform where many mainstream marketers are experimenting. It sets the assignment in a venue in which students can experience the marketer's situation and

ramifications of the recommendations they make. Related to this point, the virtual environment is sufficiently complex to mimic that found in the real world. Some students were more intimidated by the complexity of the project and this appeared in a minority of the comments. Lastly, the grading format for this project, using rubrics and chunking, was very well received. The following comments reflect these themes.

On the experience:

Your classes have a great balance of practical assignments paired with assignments that enhance personal growth. By researching companies that already exist, exploring pro's and con's of choices that they've made, and making suggestions for their future growth, I was given training that many students don't receive until their first job. But you didn't just throw us out there, you set up very clearly outlined projects and expectations, so that we were able to self-evaluate before submitting work to be graded. We were able to grow as individuals while growing as students preparing for the work force.

My team created an actual plan for a SL business—and it's working! We hear from our client with messages that say how grateful he is for our help.

On the innovative environment:

So often I feel that business is not creative—Second Life showed me the creative side of strategic thinking.

I felt so far behind before this project; there's a whole world of technology out there affecting marketing. I would have missed it completely except for this project.

On the using rubrics and chunking:

A good professor grades a student's work fairly based on how well they did, but a great professor grades a student's work and let's them re-do it in order to actively learn what they did wrong and how to make it better. [She] allowed me to find out how I could make my work better which in turn helped me learn a great deal more.

Her classes should come with the sub-title: 'Team Work!' Every assignment required students to be responsible for separate tasks within a project, just like in an "real" organization. But the best part was that the project made us better team members. We learned how to negotiate effectively, how to manage stress, and how to communicate with our team. I graduated never having to fake it because I have all the tools to be a success!

The way she graded was excellent. It allowed students the opportunity to not only re-evaluate the work themselves but also, it motivated them to go back and make the changes. Personally, I get more from reading comments and then acting on those comments versus just reading comments and throw-

ing my paper on top of all the other papers I have stacked in my room.

On the complexity of Second Life:

I get why SL was required for this project but it was frustrating. I spent so much time trying to figure out how operate, just how to move my avatar; or get people to talk to me.

I learned a lot but when you use this assignment again, I hope you'll consider a different virtual world. SL servers crash so often. And it doesn't run on all computers. Our team was limited in who could run the software.

I was really intimidated being 'in-world'—this was beyond my comfort zone.

On the overall experience:

I have learned more this semester than any other. All of the terminology and strategy I learned in class was put to use ten-fold this semester. I can confidently say that I am prepared for all of the new stress to come.

In terms of instructor course goals, the virtual world marketing plan assignment offers a technique for enhancing student engagement while applying course

principles. Student evaluations of the assignment suggest that students recognize the assignment as appropriate for meeting the learning objectives for the course.

In summary, the real world experience offered by a virtual world environment makes for a beneficial context for marketing plan projects. Virtual world entrepreneurs enhance task significance and meaningfulness, realism, and audience authenticity. Rubrics ensure clear expectations on all relevant criteria and enable differentiated instruction, while the chunking of assignments enhances accountability and provides for periodic feedback to be used for improving task performance.

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