

Establishing Knowledge and Cultivating Talent via Experiential Learning: The Case of the Fashion Retail Lab

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Purpose: In this teaching innovation, “*The Boutique*”, the students are guided through the experiential learning cycle: experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. The assignment requires individuals to take on retail roles (i.e., operations, planning & buying, communications, training and development, accounting, and merchandising) to execute desired business outcomes. While studies of retail labs in the past have been limited to exploring the physical elements of a store, this assignment highlights techniques in which social media campaigns can be used to enhance retail goals. This innovative real-life lab experience thereby responds to the challenge that retail educators face encounter to get students to actively integrate ongoing digital strategies with actual retail operations.

Method/Design and Sample: The retail lab learning experience was analyzed through students’ qualitative comments using directed content analysis. This input was compared against the course’s learning outcomes.

Results: Students reported that the lab enhanced their digital and social media knowledge, teamwork skills, real world application, collaboration capabilities, understanding of sales and profits, and engagement with the consumer community.

Value to Marketing Educators: The paper benefits marketing educators by providing a blueprint of a retail lab that helps students to develop communication and teamwork skills, decision-making abilities, and forge career paths. In particular, the exercise builds students’ digital and social media knowledge. We also outline 8 learning outcomes to further students’ learning goals.

Keywords: fashion retail, experiential learning, social media, retail lab, digital retail

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Global fashion retail sales are estimated to reach \$1.85 trillion for 2019 with a growth of 23% forecasted between 2017-2022 (Coresight Research, 2019). The industry is experiencing dynamic paradigm changes shaped by consumer shifts, technology and macroeconomic factors. Fashion retailers must think digital-first, achieve even faster speeds to market and be active in social causes (State of Fashion, 2018). As consumers become more savvy and demanding, retailers’ emphasis on innovations in social media, technology and advanced data analytics has increased (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfalt, 2017). Social media is an integral component of the retailing omni-channel framework, further necessitating the need for higher education to adapt to the speed of technological innovation and industry demands (Freberg & Kim, 2018). These demands contribute to the development of post-secondary retail management education which utilizes experiential learning in a real-world retail context (Grewal, Motyka, & Levy, 2018).

Through experiential learning, students gain theoretical knowledge which they apply and practice

(Lange, Rosengren, Colliander, Hernant & Liljedal, 2018). Case studies, field projects, role-plays and gaming simulations are integrated into courses across the curriculum in retail programs (e.g., Sietz & Razzouk, 2002). In this paper, we elaborate on the case of a fashion retail lab that develops social media knowledge and skills gained through operating a fashion retail business. The goal is to develop skills in strategic thinking, collaborative teamwork and communication. The structure, learning outcomes and evaluation process are illustrated with an emphasis on the digital retail pedagogy.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN RETAIL

Experiential learning activities that bridge the gap between academic curriculum and the marketplace’s practical needs include games and simulations, live case studies, internships, client-based projects and laboratories (Cadotte, 2016). Although simulations and case studies provide numerous benefits, including enhanced learning and engagement, they are typically

controlled by the professor (Burgess, 2012). Internships, while providing an exclusive hands-on experience, can often be limited to only certain departments such as marketing, sales or buying but rarely give students a complete view of a retail company (Seitz et al., 2002).

However, activities that focus on partnering with industry ensure that students gain an understanding of the dynamic changes occurring in retailing. In these partnerships, companies identify issues and faculty provide content related to the issues. Students then develop solutions via critical thinking and active learning (Oh & Polidan, 2018), thereby developing

employability skills while limiting the risk of running a business (Daly, 2001).

Laboratory activities also engage students with real retailing situations via active learning (Valdez & Cervantes, 2018). Researchers have discussed how lab courses integrate concepts taught in retailing and merchandising via operation of a retail store (Seitz & Razzouk, 2002), and via a pop-up consignment store in a retail promotion course (Burgess, 2012). These experiential learning activities typically develop critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills. Table 1 further highlights the characteristics of these laboratory insights.

Table 1: Characteristics of retail laboratory insights

“The Store” (Seitz & Razzouk, 2002)	“Internet Business” (Daly, 2001)
-Merchandise: snacks, school supplies, clothing from bookstore	-Merchandise: gift baskets
-Paperwork for store and homework assignments	-Evaluations include student course evaluations, reflection papers and debriefings
-Management roles -Instructor works primarily with management	-Focus on Internet skills -Role of instructor is one of adviser
-Student Management complete peer evaluations that are used in determining individual grades	-Students helped along by committees and detailed task lists
“Pop-up Retailing” (Burgess, 2012)	“Retailing Laboratory” (Valdez & Cervantes, 2018)
-Consignment Merchandise; can change consistently dependent on availability	-Merchandise: grocery, office supplies and athletic clothing supplied by partners
-Each student works a total of 9 hours in sales associate shifts	-Linked to Learning Centre
-only opens in the Spring -store décor varies dependent on loans	-Students analyze consumer behavior by conducting research
-Students apply for positions and faculty assign tasks not roles	-Equipped with technologies such as QR, RFID, Smart Fitting Rooms

However, few activities also integrate the development of digital and social media skills, which are critical to retail digital innovation. Researchers have noted how e-retailing and e-commerce skills can be developed in a retail course that includes a tech-enabled lab with a student-operated Internet business (Daly, 2001). Such a retailing lab equipped with technologies also allows students to analyze consumer behavior and shopping habits (Valdez & Cervantes, 2018). Although these studies focus on distinct lab activities, they do not feature a fully integrated approach to developing digital marketing skills within a dynamic, real-world setting.

This paper extends these findings to provide a description of an innovative pedagogical approach to social media marketing education, which features a real-life/real-time experiential learning environment – “The Boutique”. Students create, implement and evaluate a social media marketing strategy engaging with real customers during the ongoing operation of a real retail business. This innovative approach is described below.

THE BOUTIQUE: FASHION RETAIL LAB

The Boutique has been an integral part of the Fashion Business program since 1973. It caters to the diverse population of students, faculty and staff at one of the largest community college campuses in Canada. This Retail Lab requires students to apply knowledge gained in several courses across the curriculum to real-time operation of *The Boutique*. Students assume roles and responsibilities in key functional areas characteristic of retail organizations.

The Retail Lab is embedded within the Retail Operations course which was redeveloped prior to the 2017/2018 academic year in response to the College’s digital strategy. The College is committed to designing an engaging and enriched curriculum, developing student’s digital competencies and giving students assurance that they will be competent and prepared for the growing digital career opportunities. Retailers require that graduates possess the ability to plan and create written and visual content that meets brand guidelines, and to utilize analytical skills to report on social media metrics. In addition, they require that graduates are able to prospect and engage with

influencers, possess photography and video skills, and are proficient with creative software. The revised course/curriculum, therefore, further integrates experiential learning concepts to better engage students while meeting evolving demands of the retail industry.

It is common in higher education for courses to operate in silos. For instance, students may learn retail services in one course while learning consumer behavior in another course. In practice, retail organizations are not compartmentalized and often

require integration of insights between and across topics (Elam & Spotts, 2004). *The Boutique* is designed for students who are enrolled in the second-year retail operations course. At this stage of the curriculum, they have learned concepts that align with the operation of a retail business. Figure 1 shows the courses taken by the Fashion Business students prior to their participation in the retail lab. Knowledge gained through these courses across the curriculum are applied to running *The Boutique*.

Figure 1: Retail Store Operations – Capstone Course



The learning outcomes of the course are shown in Table 2. Effective planning, a detailed weekly schedule and flexibility in lesson planning are critical to the operation of the Retail Lab (Valdez & Cervantes, 2018). There is time dedicated within the course for “strategic meetings” which provide opportunities for reflection, feedback and self-assessment (Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002). The faculty member acts as teacher, facilitator, and CEO, and their expertise in retail operations and fashion buying are essential for teaching the course content and for leading the operation of the business. Given that it is common for

students to already have previous retail-related employment experiences, faculty facilitate learning by building upon what students already know, and encouraging them to express their beliefs and apply their thoughts (Kolb, 2014). Ideas generated from these experiences provide diversity of opinions and initiatives. Ongoing consultation with peers and feedback from faculty are critical for fostering learning, interest, curiosity, motivation and attitude (see appendix A for images of the *The Boutique*). Retail partners are brought in as experts to conduct workshops and lectures (e.g., in social media, merchandising, styling).

Table 2: Learning outcomes: Retail Store Operations Course

Learning Outcomes
1. Develop an understanding of the collaboration between all roles and functions of a retail operation.
2. Demonstrate the ability to carry out duties and responsibilities of a given role.
3. Create strategies and analyze results to make the business realize a profit.
4. Develop analytical skills required for evaluating a business.
5. Explain the significance of goal setting and budgetary planning on a retail operation.
6. Practice working in a team in ways that show respect for working relationships while successfully mastering task completion.
7. Use calculations necessary for interpreting and responding to reports.
8. Practice oral and written communication skills.

FASHION RETAIL LAB STRUCTURE AND EVALUATION

During the first class of the retail operations course, students are given an overview of the functional areas related to the operation of the retail business. These areas include: Operations, Communications, Merchandising & Styling, Accounting, Training & Development, and Planning, and Buying (see Figure 2). The Professor reviews the roles and responsibilities in detail while informing students of the skills that are associated with each functional area. This gives

students the opportunity to consider choosing roles that fit their strengths and expose them to potential career paths. The goal is to tap into their career and topical interests in order to increase motivation and to place more value on the learning. The size of each team is flexible to accommodate students' first or second choice of roles. Once the teams are formed, a team leader is selected. The team leads do not act as managers or have a role in the evaluation of other students; they are the touchpoint and communication link between the Professor and team.

Figure 2: Functional Areas



Time is allocated to establish training and group norms, to define clear roles and responsibilities, and to develop expectations of team and individual conduct. The professor meets with each team to review all responsibilities and to set objectives and expectations. For example, the communications team would be informed of social media branding standards with a strategic discussion around images, captions and posting frequency. All students would have training on the POS system, customer service standards and store policies. To facilitate this, a dedicated time is scheduled within the students' timetables to conduct training sessions with teams, and to schedule meetings. Upper year student mentors are hired to make this process more efficient so that *The Boutique* can be open for business in a timely manner and so that students get the longest interval possible to experience their roles. In order to have a hands-on experience with interaction with customers and feedback useful for ongoing strategy development, all students work 25 to 30 hours

(depending on the class size) in the store as sales associates.

Responsibilities and tasks are developed for the teams so that each member carries equitable accountability and workload. Although the roles are equitable, the timing in the semester to complete the tasks may vary. For instance, the training and development team's workload is quite substantial prior to opening the store in comparison to the accounting team's workload that is often ongoing from the onset to the closing of the store.

The *Training and development* team is responsible for scheduling sales associate shifts, point-of-sale (POS) training, opening and closing procedures, customer service, and tracking performance metrics (e.g., sales productivity).

The *Accounting* team handles ongoing oversight of daily sales reporting and completes the financial statements. They also work with the operations team on physical inventory count once the store is closed.

The *Operations* team sets the store policies, monitors loss prevention, updates the sales forecast, and handles operating expenses.

The *Buying* team strategizes and organizes merchandise purchasing for the next season. Market trips are scheduled with the Professor to visit suppliers and view brand lines. The team then builds an assortment plan that meets the product and pricing strategy of the business. This team must consider the target market, forecasted trends and analysis from past season to make educated decisions for the next season.

The *Planning* team compiles this analysis for the Buying teams, including brand, color, style and size analysis. This team also uses the POS back office system to generate regular reports that are presented in class to lead strategic discussions.

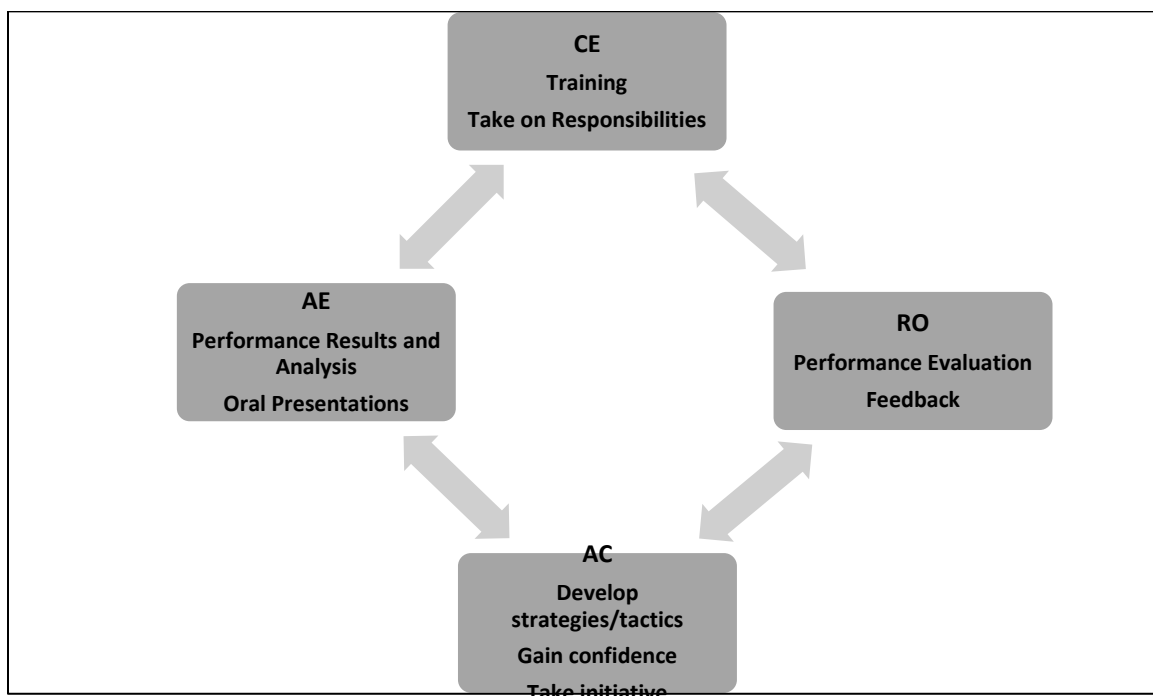
The *Communications* team develops the promotional calendar, handles all on-site communication around the college, and plans featured events. A significant responsibility that has been developed for this team is to develop a social media strategy via Facebook and Instagram. This team creates the strategy, tracks the ongoing analytics of the various social media platforms, and makes adjustments to tactics based on their statistics. They collaborate with other teams to ensure featured products are on trend (i.e. with Buying) and consistent weekly messages (i.e. with Merchandising & Styling).

The *Merchandising and Styling* team revises the store layout on a weekly basis; they monitor the use of mannequins, fixtures, displays, and props to create an enticing customer experience and to augment their visual merchandising front. Both the communications and merchandising team work closely together and are expected to oversee the impact of their tactics.

Goals are set for sales, markdowns, end of season inventory value and stock shortage. These goals are shared in advance to determine key performance indicators (KPI). Historical data as well as internal and external factors are evaluated to specify the goals. Each team is also encouraged to set their own objectives. For example, the communications team may set goals in improving specific social media metrics or the buying team may set goals related to mark-up.

Throughout the Retail Lab, students are guided through the experiential learning cycle: experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Border, 2007). Figure 3 demonstrates how students undergo the four-stage model of the experiential learning process. While acknowledging that performance metrics of the store are important, the grading weight is primarily focused on the learning process rather than on performance metrics. Evaluation is tied to students' roles and includes two instructor-led performance evaluations and a team presentation constituting 60% of their overall grade. The performance evaluations are structured around their responsibilities, thereby motivating them to be accountable, to document their progress, and to receive feedback midway through the semester. In particular, students are evaluated on their ability to use social media channels effectively and creatively. During team presentations, students discuss the hits and misses of tactics (supported by related social media statistics), discuss challenges, demonstrate accomplishments, and highlight the impact their actions have on sales and profits. The evaluation of the lab experience is thereby mitigated by the students' ongoing learning from the integration of real-time digitalization and social media with the ongoing operation of *The Boutique*.

Figure 3: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle



RETAIL DIGITALIZATION & SOCIAL MEDIA

The course redevelopment focused on developing skills and knowledge in social media, contributing to the accomplishment of Learning Outcomes #3 and #7 (See Table 2). Prior to the redevelopment, *The Boutique* used Facebook and Instagram as touchpoints, but they had not been used strategically to engage with customers and affect financial performance. Students strategized social media campaigns as they would develop their personal brands. As a result, each cohort had different styles, aesthetics and strategies resulting in losses of followers.

This redevelopment focused on developing strategic social media programming. In order to develop related knowledge, retail industry experts provide workshops focused on the definition of the digital voice and strategy for *The Boutique*. They provide current, timely experiences and perspectives focused on the optimization of social media use and on the critical evaluation of the current use of social media channels. Further, students are encouraged to use Sandbox spaces at the campus which are equipped with the technology and equipment necessary to create and enhance their visual digital content using photography and video. Support staff, workshops and tutorials are also available to students to assist with digital content creation.

Students start by leveraging the digital channels to promote opening day, display products through photo

styling, create exclusive contests, and use hashtags and caption tactics. They are encouraged to take initiative and apply innovative concepts and strategies for engaging customers effectively and for improving performance metrics. These ideas are supported through performance evaluations and constant feedback.

ASSESSMENT

The revised curriculum was evaluated using A) qualitative and B) quantitative data at the conclusion of the initial offering of the revised curriculum (i.e., April 2018). A) The students were asked to provide comments about their learning experience and their input was analyzed using directed content analysis, based on the course's Learning Outcomes (see Table 2) for categorizing the comments. Multiple researchers reviewed the data, utilizing comparative, inductive analysis to determine categorization (see Table 3). B) As part of their final evaluation for the course, each team assessed strategies and tactics used throughout the semester to determine successes and failures. They utilized quantitative evidence in the form of statistics and metrics including follower count; the number of times followers watched; the number of impressions; visits; reach; engagement rate; number of likes and top performing visual content.

Table 3: Student's comments on "what they learned most from the boutique experience"

Outcomes	Student's Comments
Teamwork skills	"How to work as a team along with understanding other's ideas/opinions could have a better turn out than my own." "I've learned that there will definitely always be conflict what you are working in a group. To overcome the conflict and work together is the real reward." "What it is like to work with others and rely on them."
Real world application	"What I learned most is that it is actually very complicated to run a store." "This class gave me invaluable experience and knowledge that I can now apply when working in the retail industry." "The boutique gave me priceless experience to carry with me in my future career."
Collaboration	"Understand the role of each department." "I learned that each team's role is important and most effective with collaboration."
Sales and Profits	"How much effort and planning goes into making a business profitable." "I learned that becoming predictable with markdowns is dangerous as customers will simply wait for them." "Each person's attempts will impact the work and sales of the boutique." "The real-life experience showed the harder we work/ the better results will be."
Sense of community	"I enjoyed working with different people. I talk every day now with students I never talked to." "I learned a lot about my fellow classmates and became closer as friends."

Students reported that they enjoyed the experience of taking risks and learning what worked well and what didn't. They utilized multiple digital media strategies, including calls to action through an Instagram incentive called #-----Style¹ and boosting posts on Facebook

targeting specific audiences by age, gender and geographic location. They learned about timing and repetition of posting strategies, and about which content was best suited for each channel. Storytelling was used to build strong emotional connections with customers,

¹ Name omitted for identification purposes

where team members told the story of their role in *The Boutique* and the outcome of their learning experience. The human element of the story enticed customers to support the students.

CHALLENGES

Implementing a fashion retail lab presents challenges with constancy, investment, successful outcomes and social media presence. Given that there are new teams every semester with different skill sets and that a new semester means a new training process, it is difficult to maintain a consistent *Boutique* brand. Documentation of teams' processes is key to developing constancy between the functional areas in each semester.

Investment challenges associated with implementing the fashion retail lab include a state-of-the-art POS system necessary for analyzing sales data, and fixtures necessary for display, which may be provided by industry partners. The largest investment is the merchandise, which is purchased in advance of each season (reflecting "real" fashion retailers) building *The Boutique's* assortment. This process requires that faculty and students proactively forecast sales and inventory goals to establish open to buy budgets for purchase requirements.

Moreover, *The Boutique* has a short selling season. It closes before the Xmas season which is traditionally the retailers' busiest season. Given that an optimum learning experience is contingent upon a successful business operation, this poses as a barrier to evaluate its success.

The evolving features of social media present numerous learning and implementation challenges for students and faculty. *The Boutique's* target market is large and diverse, with numerous customer groups not

engaged with social media (i.e. faculty). Not only is there a new team responsible for social media each semester, there is also a time period between semesters when there is no monitoring of social media. As a result, *The Boutique's* social media presence is difficult to maintain, and the momentum for ongoing participation may dissipate.

CONCLUSION

Through the Retail Lab, students develop communication and teamwork skills, decision-making abilities, awareness of retail career paths and confidence. The student comments (see Table 3) indicate that the retail lab is relevant, inspiring and a strong applied learning opportunity. Faculty involved with *The Boutique* build relationships with students, becoming familiar with their strengths and career goals. This is beneficial for career advising, internship placements, and community building.

The Boutique provides an experiential learning opportunity to create a social media marketing strategy for a real business, engage with real customers, track analytics and make adjustments to tactics, integrate insights and collaborate throughout an active multi-team operation, and evaluate the efficacy of their use of an integrated, multi-platform social media strategy. Students are thereby thoroughly engaged with their experiential learning process and encouraged to develop initiatives for their real-world business through their social media successes, failures and insights. Future research should test the efficacy of the fashion retail lab and the impact of the experience on student's digital knowledge and skill development.

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Appendix A: "The Boutique"

