Innovations in Digital Retailing

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The retail industry today is witnessing a transformation globally, fueled by the proliferation of digital technologies directly impacting buying behavior. In fact, some of the world's fastest growing retail companies, Amazon, Jingdong (JD.com), Alibaba and EBay define themselves as digital technology companies operating in the retail industry. Retailers are investing in radical strategies that require employees to be proficient not just in the traditional aspects of retailing but also be skillful in non-traditional aspects such as analytics, digital marketing, mobile commerce, social commerce, website development/ management, omni-channel pricing and merchandising strategies. Accordingly, it is no secret that business employers are seeking students who are not just proficient in traditional retailing concepts but those who can tackle challenges arising in a digital retailing environment with a proficiency in the above noted skills. With this in mind, we initiated a call for papers in the area of "Innovations in Digital Retailing Education" with the hope of learning from our peers on how they are changing the retail curriculum to reflect the needs of the market.

Four original articles are presented in this special issue from a call of papers, which yielded 8 submissions. These papers provide a good overview of innovative pedagogical practice and research in the field. The first paper "Establishing Knowledge and Cultivating Talent via Experiential Learning: The Case of the Fashion Retail Lab," by Anna Cappuccitti, Frances Gunn, and Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee describes a pedagogical innovation - retail learning lab or "The Boutique." This experiential assignment involves students working in groups performing specific retail roles - operations, planning & buying, communications, training and development, accounting, and merchandising. The authors provide details on implementation of the concept, the curricular components to support student learning and performance, and assurance of learning criteria. Active involvement in actual retail operations helps students discover their preferences for various careers. The proposed assessment of learning goals – measured through content analysis of student feedback, present an alternative means of evaluating conceptual learning outcomes and soft skills including communication, teamwork, and decision-making that are more difficult to teach but highly valued by employers.

Most educators recognize the need to reimagine their retail marketing programs that will prepare their students for careers in digital retail but are apprehensive of the scope, uncertainties, and difficulties associated with radical changes in curricula. Knight et al. present one approach by a department at a large, public university over a period of 20 years, to prepare students for 21st century careers in a retail ecosystem unified by digitization, technology, and consumer centricity. The recognition that retail has evolved from a retailer-centric perspective to a consumer-centric paradigm drives curriculum development as well the importance of analytical skills for retail graduates. They offer a template that retail educators can use to formulate their own program revisions.

A specific context of a project-based course that incorporates a consumer/user-centric approach to retail success is discussed in the third paper, "Redesigning An Online Store User Interface: A User-Centered Design Approach," by Dr. Yang. This paper showcases a user-centered website design pedagogy which was incorporated in an experiential learning project. The project utilizes Kolb's experiential learning theory and finds that the project benefited students in developing User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX) design competencies. Knowledge of UI and UX are valuable for retail students in order to offer a memorable experience to consumers in a digital environment.

Finally, the paper titled "Physical Store Development in the Era of Digitalization – Experiential Learning in Collaboration with City Center Management" by Carin Rehncrona and Ola Thufvesson offers an European perspective on how digitalization of a real geographical site can be introduced into a class assignment. The paper outlines a project where students collaborated with city center management to assess a geographical area in the city of Helsingborg in Sweden where retail businesses are struggling. The results and challenges of the teaching innovation are detailed in this paper.

In summary, these four papers provides a varied view of how our peers are altering their retail curriculum to address the needs of employers and to get students ready for the dynamic job market. We hope that these papers will aid in creating new courses and/or innovate your existing retail course.