

2016

Designing a Fully Online Social Marketing Course for 21st Century Learners

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Recommended Citation

Atkins, B., Ryan-Harshman, M., Vogel, E., Jones Taggart, H., McLean, J., & Myco, C. (2016, November 2-6). Designing a Fully Online Social Marketing Course for 21st Century Learners. Paper presented at the *Higher Education in Transformation Symposium, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada.*

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DESIGNING AN ONLINE SOCIAL MARKETING COURSE

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Presented at the Higher Education in Transformation Symposium

November 2 - 4, 2016 in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of a Social Marketing for Public Health course created for health sciences students at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). The course was intended to help students develop the skills required for planning and delivering social marketing campaigns. The development of this course brought together members of the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Teaching and Learning Centre at UOIT with individuals from ChangeMakers, a Canadian social marketing agency. Designing authentic learning experiences, providing students of a range of technical backgrounds opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes, building in a strong social element to suit the nature of subject area, and scaffolding student learning in a fully asynchronous learning environment were four overarching challenges faced by the development team. This paper addresses those challenges, discusses the theoretical underpinnings and learning theories – including Constructive Alignment and Universal Design for Learning – which guided this process and identifies steps for further developing this course for future offerings.

Keywords: course design, marketing, online, universal, health sciences, constructive alignment, ChangeMakers

Designing a Fully Online Social Marketing Course for 21st Century Learners

In 2015, a new online course, *Social Marketing for Public Health*, was developed for health sciences students at the University of Ontario Institute for Technology (UOIT). The course was intended to help students develop the skills required for planning and delivering social marketing campaigns. The development of this course brought together members of the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) with individuals from ChangeMakers, a social marketing agency.

Though the first offering of the course was successful (yielding a formal evaluation score of 1.23 on a scale ranging from -2 to +2), a few challenges were encountered in the design process. These challenges included issues related to the design of authentic (i.e., meaningful and realistic) learning activities, planning for a range of technical abilities amongst students, fostering a social element in a fully asynchronous course and appropriately scaffolding the learning in this type of academic environment. To date, 152 students have taken this elective, the majority of whom are health sciences students. These students may experience a greater variety of social marketing opportunities in their careers, but the other students (nursing, kinesiology) may also be afforded such opportunities in the health field. This paper explores how challenges in designing the course were addressed, which learning theories guided the design process, what lessons were learned through the development and facilitation of this course, and then identifies next steps for future offerings of this course.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Learning Theories

Though each instructor brings their own experiences and teaching philosophy to the course design process, and certain practices are relevant to specific learning contexts and disciplines, educational developers from the TLC at UOIT place an emphasis on good practices

in course design including principles of constructive alignment and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As such, principles of both constructive alignment and UDL guided the development of this course.

Constructive Alignment

According to Biggs (2010), constructive alignment is a method which involves determining what students should learn and how they will demonstrate what they have learned before teaching occurs. Specifically, learning outcomes, assessments, and teaching and learning activities (TLAs) should be aligned (or appropriately matched). This also means that, rather than beginning with what topics will be covered in a course, paying careful attention to the desired learning outcomes and how students will demonstrate their achievement of those learning outcomes are starting points in the course design process. Biggs (2010) refers to the verb as the ‘common link’ between learning outcomes, assessment methods and TLAs when utilizing constructive alignment (p. 9). As such, a large portion of the early weekly meetings between the course instructor and educational developer focused on the specific language used in the learning outcomes for this course with an emphasis on the verbs used in each learning outcome in particular. Through this part of the process, the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) was used as a reference to analyze which specific cognitive skills the course would help students develop and to ensure that these outcomes were appropriately articulated. Further into the development of the course, matching the specified learning outcomes with relevant TLAs and assessments became the focus of discussion (see Table 1):

Table 1. *Learning Outcomes, Assessments and Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs)*

<u>Learning Outcomes</u>	<u>Assessments</u>	<u>TLAs</u>
1. Explain basic concepts of social marketing, including definitions of key terms	Self/peer assessment – students are asked to explain basic concepts of marketing, define key terms and grade peers' answers	Reading, viewing videos, exploring web sites
2. Explain the role of legislation and policy in social marketing	Discussion board posting	Reading, viewing videos
3. Distinguish social marketing plans from traditional public health interventions	Discussion board posting	Reading, viewing videos, exploring web sites
4. Describe a chronic disease problem that can be addressed by a social marketing plan	Assignment 1 – Students select a target audience and behaviour to change (short paper)	Exploring ideas for a campaign using textbook and the Internet or by examining workplace behaviours
5. Apply the formative research process as it applies to social marketing programs	Assignment #1 – Select a target audience and behavior to change (short paper)	Reviewing existing literature and discussing ideas with peers and colleagues
6. Utilize formative research to select a target audience, behaviour(s) to change, and marketing mix to effect change	Assignment #1 – Select a target audience and behavior to change (short paper)	Viewing videos, reading
7. Evaluate current social marketing programs that have chronic disease as their focus	Assignment #2 – Evaluate an existing social marketing campaign (short paper)	Conducting a search of the literature re: program evaluation and watching commercials to gain insight on repositioning
8. Design a detailed intervention based on selected strategies and audience research	Assignment #3 – Design a detailed campaign (proposal with samples)	Viewing videos, learning to use creative tools
9. Discuss the opportunities and challenges encountered when implementing a social marketing program	Discussion board responses and comments posted to student blogs	Optional postings to discussion board or to student blogs

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning is an approach to curriculum development and design that involves removing barriers to learning and creating a learning environment that is intended to enable all learners to succeed (CAST, 2011). As described in an article by teaching staff from the Harvard School of Education, “it embeds accessible pedagogy into three specific and central considerations in teaching: the means of representing information, the means for students’ expression of knowledge, and the means of engagement in learning” (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006, p. 136). Below are a few brief examples of how each of the three principles of UDL were incorporated in the course.

Multiple means of representation. Course content and activities were presented to students in a variety of modalities: videos, online course readings (e-text, article and web site hyperlinks), digital presentations in the form of PowerPoint slides, and recorded lectures. To provide clarification on key details, the course instructor described the assessment expectations and options as well as other key course details in print format and in a YouTube video.

Multiple means of action and expression. Providing students the chance to demonstrate their achievement of the course learning outcomes involved including a range of options for representing their ideas. Students were encouraged to use whichever media they were comfortable using to plan and describe a social marketing campaign. With this, providing evaluation criteria that focused more on content rather than format was important. Artistic and social media content rather than style were worth 40/100 marks on the students’ final project. Furthermore, to help students navigate what was required from week-to-week, the course syllabus included an organizer for the week/dates of the course, topic and activities to be completed.

Multiple means of engagement. The course instructor sought to motivate learners and generate interest early in the course. In the course introduction video, she addressed the real-world relevance of the course, explained what students were expected to do in order to be successful in the course, and emphasized that each student could bring their unique skills to the course. Furthermore, the course included opportunities to work both independently and with peers. Students worked on course assignments on their own but could share their work with peers for commenting via the blog tool and discussed course topics via the course discussion board on weeks in which discussions were assigned. The use of the discussion board, blogs (which included a comment feature that students could use to discuss ideas and drafts of work), and a self and peer assessment tool provided students with different ways to engage with course materials and peers.

Course Design Challenges

Though the course development team was enthusiastic about the opportunity to develop a new online course for health sciences students that would involve industry partners, a number of challenges presented themselves early in the process. Designing authentic learning experiences, providing students with a range of technical skills and experiences opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the course learning outcomes, building in a strong social element to suit the nature of the subject area, and scaffolding student learning in a fully asynchronous environment were four overarching challenges faced by the development team.

Designing Authentic Learning Experiences

Creating authentic learning experiences for students in this fully online course was a major challenge encountered early in the development process. With this, it was important to the development team that students in this course would feel that the course and its resources were

selected and tailored specifically for them. A lot of time and thought went into selecting existing resources that would fit well with the specified course learning outcomes as well as creating new resources including videos of the course instructor explaining key elements of the course and a case study developed by partners at ChangeMakers.

Partnering with individuals from ChangeMakers allowed the design of the course to draw upon actual examples of existing social marketing campaigns so students could gain insight into what actually occurs through these processes. A case study based on realistic scenarios and accompanying videos that would fit the particular curriculum for this course were developed and filmed by members of ChangeMakers. ChangeMakers wrote a detailed case study, and filmed 11 videos (one introductory video, five challenge videos, and five solution videos) from which the students could learn about an active social marketing campaign. The SAFE Youth campaign used a popular part of youth culture – zombies – to symbolize workplace hazards.

In the absence of face-to-face or mandatory synchronous online discussions, the use of the course discussion board was intended to allow students to demonstrate their achievement of a number of the course learning outcomes which would, overall, measure students' abilities to converse knowledgeably about social marketing as per the instructor's expectations outlined in the introductory video on assessments.

The three major course assignments, which will be described in more detail later in this paper, required students to follow through the process of evaluating an existing social marketing campaign and planning a social marketing campaign that would have relevance in the lives of students in this course and their communities.

Furthermore, a course text which focused on the specific steps that are followed in a social marketing campaign was selected for the course. The course instructor believed this

would complement the practical and authentic nature of the course assignments. This text highlighted the practical knowledge required to plan and implement a social marketing campaign, providing numerous examples of such campaigns – the examples were an important factor in the selection of the textbook.

Lastly, a customized library guide containing resources that could be used for course assignments was also created by the course instructor and a UOIT health sciences librarian and embedded into the course site. This guide could be used by students for their assignments and was accessible directly on the course menu.

Addressing a Range of Technical Skills

The development team was aware that students who might enroll in the course would bring a range of experiences, preferences, and perceptions regarding online learning and these could, in turn, influence their experiences in the course. Smart and Cappel (2006) found that students with more experience with online learning, for example, rated online learning modules more favourably than their peers with less experience. The development team acknowledged that students of a range of technical expertise could enroll in this course and, in keeping with UDL, that students should be given opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways. As such, it was a challenge to design learning activities and assessments that would allow all learners to adequately participate despite their technical background. Therefore, it was explained in the course outline and in the video explaining assessment details that students could be creative in developing a social marketing plan, using tools of their choice (digital posters, videos, written reports, and social media samples, as examples). To emphasize these points, the course instructor also expressed to students that they would each bring unique skills to the

assignments in the course, adding that she contributes various creative skills to projects such as this but might not, for example, know how to go about beginning a Twitter campaign.

Keeping the ‘Social’ in Social Marketing for Public Health

In keeping with the intention of creating authentic learning experiences, it was important to the development team that the social aspect of this topic was experienced by students in this online social marketing course. Furthermore, members of the development team were cognizant that a lack of social interaction can be a barrier to online learning (Muilenburg & Berge, 2015). Attempts to foster a social component included the use of blogs to showcase students’ work throughout the course, a self and peer assessment early in the course, and asynchronous online discussions that occurred during some of the weeks. Most of the students were comfortable with using the blog tool, and expressed satisfaction with feedback that could be characterized as constructive criticism to improve campaigns and especially with feedback which was complimentary in nature. The social component amongst peers will be developed in future offerings of the course.

Along with this, including the course instructor in the social interactions within the course was important. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) acknowledge in their definition of ‘teaching presence’ that it starts before the course begins. In the course development process, a considerable amount of work is completed in advance of the start date of a course and continues once facilitation of the course begins. In asynchronous online courses in particular, it can be difficult for students to know that their course instructor is actively involved in the course (Baker, 2010) perhaps due to a general lack of visibility (Anderson et al., 2001). Since the instructor and students in this course would not be meeting in person, nor were they required to meet synchronously (i.e., in real-time) online at any point, efforts were made to allow

students to sense the instructor's presence in the course. One of the larger efforts in this area was the development of customized videos which included the course instructor talking to students about expectations for the course, including assessment guidelines. Guo, Kim, and Rubin (2014) found that students in online environments were more engaged with 'talking head' videos (where they could see the speaker) as opposed to videos of PowerPoint slides. Similarly, the personalization effect, a component of multimedia learning theory, suggests that students learn more deeply when the language included in multimedia presentations is of a conversational nature (Mayer, 2003) – this principle lends itself well to the authenticity that the development team sought to infuse in the course. These findings informed the development of videos created with the assistance of a multimedia developer at the TLC. The course instructor developed a script and appeared on camera for two short videos (a maximum of seven minutes in length) which provided an introduction to the course and an explanation of the assessment methods. A conversational tone was used by the course instructor in both of these videos.

Scaffolding Learning in an Asynchronous, Online Course

Scaffolding, in regard to the teacher-learner dynamic, involves the teacher giving assistance to learners as required and gradually decreasing the amount of assistance as the learners' range of competence grows (Wood et al. 1976 in Azevedo & Hadwin, 2005). The concept of scaffolding learning, though dating back to the 1950's, has been discussed more recently within the context of 21st century learning wherein new tools and learning environments are used to facilitate learning (Azevedo & Hadwin, 2005; Puntambekar & Hubscher, 2005). Puntambekar and Hubscher (2005) argue that key features of scaffolding are often neglected in current applications of scaffolding, namely: "ongoing diagnosis, calibrated support and fading" (p.1). More generally, adequately pacing student learning is a challenge that can be faced in any

course no less fully online courses. Rust (2002) comments on the importance of providing regular assessment tasks to assist students in pacing their learning. Though students would have the flexibility to move through the content at their own pace on a given week (within the time constraints of the term and assignment due dates) in this course, ensuring that learning was adequately scaffolded, though there were no required synchronous meetings or face-to-face interactions, necessitated careful planning and clear communication of learning outcomes and assessment tasks as well as the sequence of content for each module in the course.

As explained in one of the course videos and outlined in the course syllabus, each of the assessments were designed to build upon one another and increase in complexity (i.e., gradually promote higher order thinking skills) by the final assignment. Furthermore, the course instructor was mindful of the timing of the assignments and sought to space them out in a manner that would allow her to provide timely feedback before students moved on to more challenging tasks. The first assessment was a self and peer assessment which required students to first define and explain basic social marketing terms that were introduced in the course text and then anonymously grade the responses of one peer. This provided the opportunity for all students to demonstrate that they understood foundational concepts before moving forward. To grade a peer's work, students were provided with criteria entered into the self and peer assessment tool by the course instructor. This tool is available within the course site through the suite of tools in the university's learning management system. An instructional video and document were provided to show students how to use this particular assessment tool. This serves as an example of scaffolding in an online environment as students were tasked with assessing a peer with guidance provided by the course instruction via an online assessment tool before moving on to more challenging assignments in the course.

Furthermore, rather than create one large summative assessment that required students to present a social marketing campaign, the decision was made to break this major task down into three parts: Assignment 1 – Select a target audience and behaviour to change; Assignment 2 – Evaluate an existing social marketing campaign; Assignment 3 – Create a social marketing plan.

As previously mentioned, an online course text was selected for this course specifically because it divided the process of designing and facilitating a social marketing campaign into clear steps that followed well with the course learning outcomes and assessment methods.

Discussion and Next Steps

The first offering of the course was facilitated in the spring/summer term of 2015 and was offered again in the winter and fall terms of 2016. The development process and facilitation of the course have been positive overall. Informal and formal feedback in the first two offerings provided insight with regard to both the strengths and areas for improvement in the course design. Informal feedback revealed that students preferred opportunities for interactivity and detailed rubrics for assessments. Furthermore, the course has become increasingly popular. By the third offering of the course, enrollment numbers were nearly double the amount of the first offering.

Increasing the social component of the course, perhaps through more integrated use of blogs embedded within the course site, is a future step that has been identified through this process. The challenge in this regard is including it as an element of the course that students will find to be meaningful and worthwhile and that can be sustained as larger numbers of students continue to enroll in the course. For example, a “virtual café” within the course discussion board was set up to allow students to chat about course related content in the first offering of the course, though few students used it. This could be due to a lack of understanding of the purpose

of the feature or a lack of intrinsic motivation to participate in a component of the course that was not attached to course grades. Enhancing the social presence of the instructor with additional “talking head” videos periodically throughout the course may also be beneficial.

The technical skills of students who enroll in the course may continue to be wide-ranging within the health sciences. The TLC already produces videos that explain how to use self and peer assessment and blog tools found within the learning management system, but some students still find such tools challenging. Furthermore, while a university marketing program often includes creative tools for the digital environment within its curriculum, few health sciences students have the opportunity to enroll in such courses. An alternative plan to improve health sciences students’ creative skills may be to include videos that explain how to create simple but artistic digital content. Most creative tools available over the Internet are accompanied by tutorials, but perhaps videos that are tailored toward the use of such tools in social marketing will be preferred by students.

The *Social Marketing for Public Health* course has as one of its main strengths the design of authentic learning experiences because of the contributions by ChangeMakers. Additional steps that could be taken to enhance or expand these experiences could include the development of other case studies perhaps from public health agencies or community organizations, and the inclusion of online and interactive guest lectures that allow students more access to experts in social marketing. Students in the fall 2016 offering of the course, for example, requested video content from ChangeMakers via the course instructor in order to address the question ‘*What are the future job opportunities in the area of social marketing for graduates of a Bachelor of Health Science program?*’ Maintaining this dialogue between the students, course instructors and individuals at ChangeMakers will be one way to keep the course content current and relevant.

Conclusion

From the outset, the intention was to design a course using learning theories and design features that would result in a unique elective for students. The combined expertise in the Faculty of Health Sciences, the UOIT Teaching and Learning Centre, and ChangeMakers facilitated the development of a fully online course that was well-received by students as shown through both formal and informal feedback. Fully online courses, which can be challenging for both students and instructors, can benefit from purposeful application of learning theories. For example, the application of Universal Design for Learning with its emphasis on multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement helped almost all students be successful learners regarding the development of social marketing campaigns. Fully online courses do present design challenges because, in the absence of face-to-face time with an instructor, the teaching and learning activities must be able to suitably guide the self-directed learning of students. Design challenges generally revolve around authentic learning experiences, interactivity, and technical skills. A team of people with curriculum design and subject matter expertise provides a significant advantage in designing effective and unique courses, but new teaching ideas can always be implemented. For the *Social Marketing for Public Health* course, which is currently being offered for the third time, future adjustments may include enhancing student-to-student interactivity in a scalable manner by promoting the Virtual Café concept more effectively, enhancing the social presence of the instructor via more “talking head” videos, and assisting the students in building technical skills with creative digital tools that are commonly used in social marketing campaigns.

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