

Pathways for 21st Century Learners: Integrating Industry-Based Certifications into the Marketing Curriculum

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Industry-based certifications (IBC) are test-based credentials that are administered and accredited by third-party organizations. IBCs are increasingly demanded by employers as a more precise, reliable indicator of job candidates' skills. A new marketing course, Digital Marketing Strategy, has integrated IBCs as a course enhancement to motivate students to achieve marketing credentials prior to graduation. Over the course of several semesters, students have reported that the credibility and reputation of these certificates has had a significant impact on their career success.

INTRODUCTION

Digital Marketing Strategy is an elective course open to senior undergraduate students who have successfully completed a Principles of Marketing course. The classroom instruction emphasizes concepts, frameworks, and best practices for digital marketing including a comprehensive overview of topics such as e-commerce business models, web site design, digital advertising, search engine marketing, content marketing, e-mail marketing, social media marketing, and mobile marketing. As a course enhancement, third-party digital certifications are required. Many digital marketing certifications are available and are appropriate for classroom use. They are from well-known companies (e.g., Google) and are generally free to students. Upon certification, students can promote their credentials via LinkedIn and resumes. These certifications recognize students for their achievement in learning about tools and techniques that meet the continuously changing requirements of the workplace.

This paper will discuss how IBCs fit into a changing global picture for the delivery of training and skills to undergraduate business students that enables instructors to maintain pedagogical emphasis on the concepts and decision-making strategies of digital marketing while leaving the ever-changing tools of digital marketing tactics to companies who have the time and resources to continuously manage the content and assessments for certifications.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

There is a disparity between the focus of schools of business and the needs of practitioners. Certifications can bridge this gap between theory and practice (David et al., 2011) and IBCs can help realign pre-graduate learning with post-graduate skills requirements. Based on theories of motivation, the integration of IBCs with the business curriculum provides benefits to students, educational institutions, and hiring companies (Goetz et al., 2011). Certification programs fit into the educational mix of converting intrinsic knowledge to explicit, transferable knowledge (Daniels, 2011).

The use of digital marketing certificates is a relatively new innovation which has been successfully implemented in several undergraduate business programs (Staton, 2016). These certifications offer self-paced training that enables students to learn specific skills and are flexible enough to be modified based on new platforms or tools becoming available and more prevalent in entry-level jobs. Students complete the courses outside the classroom time and if they attain certification, they can display their credentials to potential employers on websites, social media profiles, job applications, or resumes. Thus, digital marketing certificates supplements classroom instruction and provides undergraduate students with an advantage in the marketplace that enables them to develop new skills and become more comfortable with life-long learning (Love, 2011). A certificate indicates that the student has achieved a valuable proficiency that would not otherwise be promotable via a grade in the classroom.

Digital badges are conceptually similar to industry-based certifications, however, they are usually awarded by classes, departments, or schools and do not have as much validity as those awarded by outside third parties. However, Banner, Caldwell and Monroe (2014) cite Bowen (2013, 2014) to offer several reasons why badges, and by extension, certifications are advantageous to students. Accordingly, certifications are a positive motivating force that:

“encourages students to pursue deeper learning, encourages personalized learning paths and life goals, recognizes various types of learning, reveals areas of recognition not currently credited, facilitates open, shareable credentials and scaffolding of progressive badges across multiple venues, promotes flexible learning across multiple platforms and opportunities, facilitates the connection of formal and informal learning, and provides a way to demonstrate mastery of content/achievement, including that of informal learning.” (p. 23).

Moreover, industry-based certifications are emerging as a response to the growing open-education effort, including MOOCs, in which students are demanding alternative sources of knowledge that reward and recognize their efforts. IBCs also have the effect of creating a community of learners, not just in the classroom or school, but around the world. Industry-based certifications are not over emphasized in the classroom, and serve to as supplement that recognizes that learning can happen in a self-paced manner and in diverse environments beyond the traditional classroom.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DIGITAL CERTIFICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

The digital marketing strategy course was a completely new course in for the undergraduate marketing department. As such, teaching materials are developing and choices for textbooks are scarce. The course was designed as a broad overview of digital marketing, and not one merely on social media or e-commerce. The former course over-emphasizes publicity and public relations at the expense of advertising and sales and the latter is generally well-suited for a more technical course in the information systems or operations management department. Once classroom materials were found, the certifications were built around the flow of the syllabus.

Certifications are available from many sources; however, the focus of this class was not on any particular software program, so choices were driven by the popularity of the tool, cost to the student, as well as support from vendors for university or educational programs. This resulted in high-quality educational materials at no cost to students.

The digital marketing certifications are a required assignment. Based on the content of the course, three certifications were assigned, and one was optional. Students were required to become certified in Google AdWords, Google Analytics, and Hubspot Inbound certification. Hubspot is a leading provider of marketing automation software which they brand as “inbound marketing” consisting of a suite of applications related to customer relationship management (CRM), marketing, and sales. Hootsuite, a social media dashboard tool, was presented as an optional certification. In addition to the certifications, the class also included four blog posts, two ‘agency pitches’ on social media and mobile marketing, and weekly chapter quizzes.

The grading for the digital certifications enabled a grade for the student whether or not the student passed the certification. The certification assignments were due generally when the unit for that topic was finished, i.e., Hubspot Inbound certification was due after studying e-mail marketing. The syllabus included detailed instructions on how to sign up for each online course and other details.

For Google Certifications, both Google AdWords and Google Analytics were assigned. Sign up is through Google Partners. Google AdWords certification requires two exams, a Google AdWords Fundamentals course and one more from a choice of the following: Search Advertising, Display Advertising, Video Advertising, Mobile Marketing, or Shopping Advertising. These additional choices change overtime as technology and marketing interests. A passing score on Google Adwords is valid for 12 months after the exam date. Google Analytics certifications requires two courses: Google Analytics Fundamentals and Google Analytics Platform Principles.

Students may take the exam as many times as they want until the assigned deadline. However, this requires some careful planning. For Google certifications, students can re-take the exam after seven days only if they do not pass the exam. Once they have passed the exam, students cannot re-take the exam to improve their score. Google certifications require an 80% pass rate.

Inbound Certification from Hubspot works similarly. Students sign up through the Hubspot Academy and the instructor has direct support through this educational program. Hubspot has a 70% pass rate. The Hubspot certification also requires students to manage their time wisely. Students can re-take the exam after 48 hours if they don't achieve a passing score, but once they pass the exam, they cannot re-take the exam to improve their score.

Grading for the certifications incentivized students to achieve the best possible score and not merely get the minimum pass rate. Thus the grade for the certification whether the students pass or not, was the actual score on the exam. For example, a student may have achieve certification for Google AdWords with a passing score of 82 percent; however, he or she would earn 82 out of 100 points in the gradebook. One strategy that some students used, which relieved some anxiety about the grading, was to take the exam and deliberately fail it. This enabled students to assess the difficulty level of the questions and give them a better idea of how to study for the exam. Each exam presented a new set of questions, so there was no possibility of gaming this assignment. Of course, the timing of this 'test run' had to take into consideration the class deadline combined with the waiting period for re-taking the exam.

One issue that required an exception to the assignment was how to accommodate students who had documentation for extended time in test taking. These certification exams are timed by the vendor and they cannot be changed on a student by student basis. The way in which these students were accommodated was to give them the entire course time to re-take the exam as many times as possible.

IMPACT OF CERTIFICATIONS ON THE COURSE

Certifications have been a part of this course for four semesters beginning Fall 2014. The use of certifications provides the instructor with a valid and rigorous assessment of knowledge in the area of analytics, e-mail marketing, content marketing, and digital advertising. The rigor of the course is evidenced by the results of the spring 2016 semester. Google Adwords requires at least 80 percent pass rate and for this semester, 16 of 22 students were certified. Out of 200 points, the average was 81.5% with a minimum of 101 points and a maximum of 177 points. For Google Analytics, only 5 out of 22 students were certified. The average was 72.90% with a minimum of 47 points and a maximum of 92 points out of a total of 100 points. For Hubspot, 21 out of 22 students were certified; however, Hubspot only requires a 70% pass rate. From a personal conversation with a Hubspot employee, there has been some effort to raise this to 80%. That being said, the average score was 81.68% with a minimum of 67 and a maximum of 92. Note that in this class, 92 is considered an A-, so no students actually achieved an A on their certifications.

The idea of requiring certifications is not intended as a way for instructors to shirk their responsibilities to assess student learning. The fact of the matter is that instructors cannot keep up with ever-changing technologies in marketing practice. With the emphasis of our business undergraduate

education on liberal learning, instructors need to concentrate on disciplinary knowledge, communication skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, collaboration, and professionalism.

Thus, there are significant benefits for both the student and the instructor to use certifications specifically in a digital marketing strategy course. Students experience benefits during the class as well as after graduation. The certificates are challenging classroom projects, yet passing is generally attainable for most students. The fact that the certificates are integrated into the course as a grade motivates students to not merely pass, but to achieve as much as possible. Certificates provide students with an applied learning experience so they can apply the knowledge they gain in the classroom immediately to a practical, current marketing tool. As for benefits beyond the classroom, certificates from companies like Google are recognized by employers and peers as legitimate, high-quality credentials. Certificates provide enhancement to resumes and can be displayed on social networks such as LinkedIn.

There are also several benefits for instructors who incorporate certifications into a class like digital marketing. The certificate providers offer a ready solution that is more cost-effective and time-efficient than developing customized course materials. Thus, the use of certifications can reduce class preparation time, and reduce the amount of class time covering how to use software tools while enabling the instructor to focus more on digital marketing strategy, frameworks, and processes. Google regularly changes algorithms and enhances features and functionality, which would be nearly impossible for an instructor to keep up with on a semester by semester basis. The integration of technology-based learning activities can contribute to an instructor’s professional development and boost confidence in teaching hybrid courses. Because these certifications are backed by global brands, instructors can stress to students that certifications have universal portability and relevance as a recognized standard in digital marketing. Finally, certification programs enable the instructor to enhance his or her connections between the classroom and the business community as students leverage their certifications for part-time jobs, internships, or careers. Employers are seeking more ‘real world’ preparation for the workforce while instructors do not have to sacrifice their objective to educate global citizens. Students, instructors, and employers all benefit from these focused, relevant certifications.

The benefits of certification for students and instructors is summarized in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
BENEFITS OF CERTIFICATIONS FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

Benefits for Students	Benefits for Instructors
Attainable	Integrates technology and online learning
Applied learning	Enables focus on concepts
Recognized by employers	Cost effective
Established brands	Relevant to workforce
Self-directed	Community engagement

Qualitative evidence of the successful use of certifications in the classroom comes from students who completed the course and leveraged the certifications in their job search. One student anecdote which demonstrates the effectiveness and impact of this classroom innovation includes a student who was hired as a business development representative (sales) at Hubspot. This is unusual because this business school is not close geographically to Hubspot, nor does it have the reputational strength of the types of schools from which this company prefers to recruit. Other evidence of success is demonstrated by unsolicited notes from students who realized the importance of certifications in job interviews and performance in entry-level digital marketing jobs.

Some of these excerpts are quoted below.

“My bosses found it very useful and were happy to hear that colleges were starting to teach real applicable and useful tools that can be used in the real world.”

“It's nice to be tested for knowledge that is useful and current, rather than being tested on textbook terminology that could possibly be outdated.”

“I am so thrilled to tell you that I am officially hired by HubSpot and start on Monday as a Business Development Representative :) :) I am so so excited to start this new journey and can't thank you enough!”

“I would not have gotten this job without taking your class. The man who interviewed me (now my boss) was impressed with everything I knew about digital marketing from your class.”

“This summer, I worked for a magazine and they used Hubspot and thought it was the coolest tool ever, so being able to understand now what the company does and how much it can provide a company, is awesome!”

CONCLUSION

The implementation of digital marketing certifications is a unique innovation for this particular business school, which provides students with a strong value proposition as they enter the workforce. The feedback has been enthusiastic from the students, albeit after they have taken the class because the certification exams are in addition to several additional assignments and readings. Digital marketing certifications will continue to be a required part of this class; however it is the responsibility of the instructor to continuously evaluate the relevance and rigor of each certification program while being mindful of the cost to the student.

In conclusion, business schools that embrace innovative learning models will likely have a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining students. Industry-based certifications represent a new and flexible learning model; therefore, we can only hope that other educational institutions will embrace the trend, its benefits, and its inherent characteristic of being a positive response to the demands of learners in the 21st century. As well, certifications can help to close the gap between the traditional business education and the challenges of a rapidly changing technology skills in the workplace (Cobo, 2013).

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