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Time for a Marketing Curriculum Overhaul: Developing a Digital-First Approach

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Article

Time for a Marketing Curriculum Overhaul: Developing a Digital-First Approach

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Abstract

Academic programs and educators face numerous challenges related to teaching digital marketing. Today, the world of marketing *is* digital and marketing programs have struggled to maintain pace with the changes influencing marketing practice. The authors describe the M-School program at Loyola Marymount University, a program developed to address this challenge by placing digital marketing at the center of the curriculum. Through experiential learning and project-based learning, M-School courses expose students to real-life challenges involving ways in which companies and organizations generate consumer awareness, demand, and value given the significant digital shifts taking place in technology and consumer behavior. The authors highlight the creation of a *digital-first* curriculum that is aligned with industry practice and helps students develop the skills needed to become *future proof* and *real-world ready*. Quantitative and qualitative assessment over a three-year period points to the success of the M-School program in preparing students for careers in marketing. Lessons for the development of marketing curricula include the role of new course development, the need to integrate digital within existing courses, the role of a project-based learning approach with measurable outcomes, and the potential for designing transdisciplinary courses to foster students' creative, critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills.

Keywords

digital marketing, online marketing, marketing education, curriculum development, project-based learning, PBL, experiential learning, 4Cs, transdisciplinary education, M-School

The Internet has evolved to become perhaps the most significant disruptive force influencing consumer behavior, marketing practice, and marketing education. Not surprisingly, numerous industry (Theoharis, 2018) and academic (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015; Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Wind & Mahajan, 2001) sources have highlighted the *digital challenge* facing marketing practice and academia as educators struggle to maintain pace with the rapid technological changes influencing the marketing field. Regarding consumer behavior, Crittenden and Crittenden (2015) argue that "The 21st century is experiencing a communications revolution, and digital and social media marketing is changing the way consumers receive and use messages" (p. 71). To remain competitive, companies today require practitioners who are marketing, technologically, and analytically savvy (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Shankaranarayanan, 2015). Unfortunately, however, topics such as content marketing, search engine optimization, social media, and online audience development strategies are consistently undertaught at the university level (e.g., Frederiksen, 2015). In brief, an overhaul of the marketing curriculum is due. This article provides guidance for marketing educators by describing the successes and challenges of the development of a digital-first marketing program called the M-School.

The challenge facing both industry and academia becomes especially apparent when considering the significant disruptions taking place over the past two decades with the emergence of digital pioneers such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. Consumers today—particularly those *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) born after 1995—communicate, shop, and access content in a technology-rich environment. This environment is defined by 24/7 access to online stores, services, and social media, illustrating what Sultan and Rohm (2005) refer to as the *brand in the hand* phenomenon. In response, some of the world's most prominent "traditional" companies (e.g., General Electric, Federal Express, IBM) have been reinvented as they disrupt their respective industries through digital-intensive business models and operations. IBM, for example, is positioning its Watson platform as a leader in artificial intelligence and machine learning. The risks to companies who do not adapt fast enough to the digital

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challenge are significant; since 2000, over half of the companies listed in the Fortune 500 have either gone bankrupt, been acquired, or ceased to exist as a result of digital disruption (Constellation Research, 2018). However, accountability of digital spending is an important consideration for marketing executives (Perrin, 2018), and studies show that less than half of firms engaging in digital marketing have a clearly defined digital strategy that is integrated within their overall marketing strategy (Chaffey, 2017). Thus, a primary challenge for firms lies in developing digital acumen.

At the bridge between academia and industry, research also points to the need for recent marketing graduates to enter the workforce with a renewed set of skills. A survey of 150 advertising industry hiring decision makers in Los Angeles—the second largest advertising market in the United States—revealed that only 17% of respondents were excited about the current intern and entry-level applicant pool, citing that candidates consistently fell short of the required experience and understanding of the industry (M-School, 2016). The study also asked talent managers to evaluate the challenge of filling positions within specific advertising disciplines and roles, and found that strategy, digital media, analytics, technology, user experience, and digital production were the most difficult positions to fill with qualified candidates. Moreover, this gap in entry-level employee competencies and industry needs has been identified by ThinkLA, the largest West Coast consortium of advertising agencies, media companies, and brands, as one of the most pressing issues facing the industry.

In response to the rapid changes influencing marketing practice, it has never been more important for marketing educators to create curricula and adopt pedagogy that recognize and address the digital transformation taking place in both marketing practice and consumers' lives and behaviors. Referring to the exponential rate of change occurring in technology, culture, and business, author Thomas Friedman (2016) highlights how institutions such as universities " . . . are now experimenting with turning over their curriculum much faster and more often to keep up with the change in the pace of change—putting a 'use-by date' on certain courses" (pp. 35-36). Wind and Mahajan (2001) foreshadowed the radical and disruptive shift from traditional to digital marketing, appealing to businesses and marketing educators to "courageously rethink the very discipline that many of us helped to build" (p. vi). Numerous articles have featured innovative approaches to modern-day marketing education's curriculum and pedagogy, including the development of social media marketing courses (Faulds & Mangold, 2014), integrating digital and social media metrics within the marketing curriculum (Spiller & Tuten, 2015), applying project-based learning (PBL; Ye, Van Os, Chapman, & Jacobson, 2017), and radically overhauling existing marketing curricula to align with the current and future needs of students and the industries within which they will work (Wymbs, 2011).

In this article, we contribute to the marketing education literature by detailing an effort to transform the way marketing is taught at the undergraduate level with the development of the M-School program (www.m.school) at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles, CA. The M-School was designed to place digital marketing at the center of the curriculum—what we call a digital-first approach to marketing education—and address the digital challenge facing marketing educators by disrupting the traditional approach to marketing education (see Figure 1). The objective of the M-School initiative is to expose students to current digital-centric marketing tools and practices as well as the foundational theoretical areas that help explain and support industry practice and trends. To ensure that course content remains current, the M-School program was cocreated and developed with industry partners within the Greater Los Angeles creative and technology marketing and advertising community.

In the next sections, we discuss how we addressed the digital challenge though the design and development of the M-School's curriculum that leverages four pedagogical approaches:

1. Experiential Learning
2. Project-Based Learning
3. Skill Development
4. Transdisciplinary Agile Teamwork.

We conclude with lessons for marketing educators based on the successes as well as the challenges related to developing the curriculum, planning and executing transdisciplinary courses, and growing and scaling the M-School program to meet a wider body of students.

The M-School

The M-School program was launched in 2012 to address the shortage of digital-savvy graduates with a deep understanding of the burgeoning digital marketing community (e.g., advertising, analytics, new media, and content creation). In response to this need, we sought to develop a programmatic concept that forged close connections with industry professional organizations. These organizations include the aforementioned ThinkLA; the 4As; consumer-facing brands such as Electronic Arts, TOMS Shoes, Taco Bell, and Dollar Shave Club; agencies and branded content producers such as TBWA\Chiat\Day, Deutsch, Radical Media, Team One, RPA, and Universal McCann; and new media companies including Facebook, Google, Resolution Media, and Media Arts Lab. Through these partnerships, we worked to identify knowledge areas and skills that were seen as essential to students' ability to contribute immediately in the marketing creative and technology workforce on graduation (e.g., social media marketing, search engine optimization, advertising
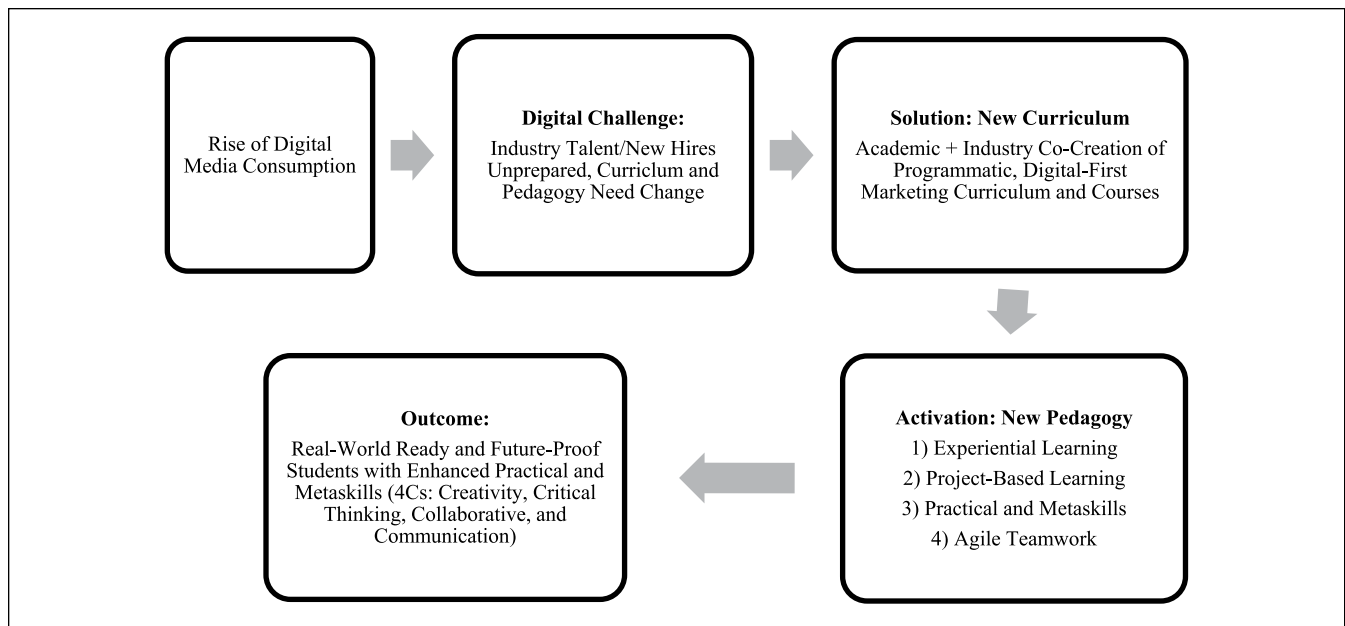
Figure 1. Addressing the digital challenge.

creative and production, cross-platform content creation, and influencer marketing). However, five years since the program's inception, the M-School has formed active industry connections with hundreds of industry professionals across numerous companies.

In developing the M-School curriculum, we drew from prior research examining the evolution of marketing practice (Wind, 2008) and the coinciding need to radically overhaul existing marketing curricula to align with the current and future needs of students and the industries within which they will work (e.g., Wymbs, 2011). In doing so, we developed a curriculum integrating the four aforementioned pedagogical pillars, the first of which is experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, defined as the process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001), plays a central role in students' learning process (Burgess, 2012; Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001). Direct experience, as opposed to abstract discussion, combines students' experience, reflection, cognition, and behavior within a goal-directed approach to learning. Applied to marketing, it provides students the opportunity to apply current marketing knowledge and skills in a real-world context (Burgess, 2012). The experiential learning approach of working with real-life situations (e.g., real brands, products, and industry partners) stands in contrast to the traditional lecture approach and conceptual projects that often operate in a hypothetical vacuum where hypotheses and conjectures are never tested.

Experiential learning approaches also help us address the different ways that students learn. On one hand, some students learn best through actual practice—the "make and do" stage—by making and creating, or by reflecting on what they see or read and drawing insights from their reflection—the "observe and reflect" stage. On the other hand, some students may learn best through conceptualization—the "think and process" stage—or through active experimentation—the "iterative learning" stage. These approaches are similar to what Richtner (2015) describes as components of a *natural learning environment*, one that sparks curiosity and motivation. Experiential learning allows for each of these learning styles.

Drawing from experiential learning theory (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001), the resulting five-course M-School curriculum incorporates *divergent learning*, where students gather and generate a wide range of ideas, concepts, and options; *assimilation*, where students process a wide range of information or ideas and condense them to a more focused set of options or decisions; *convergent learning*, where students come up with discrete concepts or solutions based on objective analysis; and *accommodating learning*, where students learn from hands-on experiences and task-oriented actions. These four learning approaches help students process and apply the relatively new information, vocabulary, and content that they are exposed to within the M-School curriculum.

Accordingly, the M-School curriculum draws heavily from experiential learning approaches to create a teaching and learning model that blends theory and practice, with digital at the core of the course content. To be specific, students

engage in each stage of learning (divergent through accommodating) via individual and group assignments that task the student with ideation and brainstorming, idea screening, analysis, and execution of the idea in the real world. For instance, students are exposed to new marketing practices such as developing and executing a paid search campaign employing Google's AdWords platform or creating and analyzing a Facebook advertising campaign. This pedagogy manifests in course design where every class session includes a breakout time for students to take the concepts and frameworks they have just learned and apply them to a specific problem. Students are also challenged to reflect on their experience to garner insights and takeaways to integrate in the next iteration. Industry partners, mentors, and instructors coach the students through this reflection.

Project-Based Learning

If experiential learning is a "learn by doing and reflecting" approach, PBL is a complementary pedagogical approach that engages students in goal-oriented challenges on more complex problems over a longer period of time. It helps students develop and hone their creativity and critical thinking skills and enables them to apply course-specific knowledge to problem solving (Ye et al., 2017). Ye et al. (2017) highlight the role of PBL based on three value propositions: (a) it identifies specific competencies that are aligned with learning outcomes, (b) it guides the creation of project assignments that lead to competency development, and (c) it incorporates faculty and mentor coaching to help guide students' performance and achievement of those defined competencies.

The M-School applies PBL through the use of real-time, industry-based projects for a variety of partner organizations, including for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Regarding length, students are tasked with a semester-long project that they must conceptualize and execute using experiential learning at every stage. Regarding complexity, students are provided with a framework for required deliverables, but must identify the problem, objective, and proposed strategy and executions themselves. Students deal with, and begin to feel comfortable with, the subjectivity and ambiguity that they will invariably experience once outside the safe and sometimes rubric-heavy confines of the classroom. Such ambiguity includes having to make and support assumptions based on available data, deciding which of the available data are relevant to their unique issue and project context, developing a coherent point of view, and defending their decisions with conviction. All of this serves to prepare students for life outside the classroom in their subsequent jobs and careers. Additionally, PBL helps forge industry connections through the involvement of industry mentors to guide and offer feedback on students' projects (i.e., Ye et al.'s [2017] third point on coaching and guidance).

PBL is closely tied to experiential learning and places students at the center of the learning process (Ye et al., 2017). For example, one important element of students' overall M-School experience takes place when students "escape" the classroom and attend class sessions off-campus at industry partners' offices. George (2015) relates this approach to a transformative learning experience and a process by which we change the student's frame of reference. For us, holding class outside of the classroom at YouTube's LA Studio, Red Bull's North American headquarters, Electronic Arts, or Facebook's offices helps transform the learning experience to one where the students are exposed not only to new content but also to the company culture, workspace, and personnel.

Skill Development

Research has identified the need for new marketing talent to develop essential skills to better prepare them for the workforce. Walker et al. (2009) highlight the numerous challenges facing new marketing graduates as they begin work for the firms that hire them. These include contributing immediately with little or no on the job training, developing more sophisticated content- or discipline-specific communication skills, and engaging in critical thinking and problem solving. These are skills that the M-School focuses on developing through experiential learning and PBL.

The value of the PBL approach is based on the development of what Ye et al. (2017) refer to as *metaskills* (e.g., higher level critical thinking, creative, and communication skills) and *technical skills* (e.g., the Google AdWords paid search platform, analysis of Simmons Market Research or Facebook data). Ye et al. (2017) argue that students who develop and begin to master metaskills are more competitive and successful in the marketplace when compared with those who possess a more limited set of skills such as marketing vocabulary, frameworks, and theory. Based on a survey of marketing practitioners, Finch, Nadeau, and O'Reilly (2012) also argue that marketing programs and curricula should prioritize students' familiarity with technical concepts such as ROI (return on investment) measurement based on offline and online data, as well as the development of students' metaskills involving their ability to apply both creativity and critical thinking to identifying, analyzing and solving problems, communicating and defending those solutions, and establishing priorities. Taken together, it becomes clear that essential skills need to be incorporated into today's marketing curriculum: metaskills (e.g., critical thinking); disciplinary skills (e.g., applied marketing theory); and technical skills (e.g., social media analytics).

Skill development has been discussed in prior research as progressing in stages. Walker et al. (2009) draw from research examining the stages of skill acquisition (Daley, 1999; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985) to map general skills, marketing

competencies and skills, employer expectations, and time to proficiency across three stages of professional development: novice, advanced beginner, and competent. A parallel to Walker et al.'s (2009) three stages of development looks at how Japanese martial arts students engage in progression referred to as *shu-ha-ri* (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). In the *shu* state, students study disciplines that are time-tested and fundamental to their practice. Once students have mastered these disciplines, they progress to the *ha* state, where students practice new variations of the traditional disciplines they had learned prior. Finally, students advance to the *ri stage*, a stage in which they have so thoroughly mastered the fundamentals and variations that they can begin to improvise and apply their fundamental learning to new situations and contexts.

The M-School applies the multistage progression of skill building in an iterative approach. Each course fine tunes the development of metaskills, introduces and applies new marketing concepts, and adds new technical skills to each student's toolbox. In terms of their professional development and progression, M-School students generally begin the program in the *shu* or *ha* state, as *novices* or *advanced beginners*. While they may have some work experience (as well as a significant body of lifelong experience as digital natives with social media and online content), they may also have little or no experience in the advertising, branding, and digital media industries. In this respect, they are learning marketing theory in parallel with practical and metaskills. Specifically, these skills include understanding the creative process; audience definition and development; earned, owned, and paid media; analytics applications (including metrics, key performance indicators, cost-per-click, cost-per-acquisition); brand strategy and positioning tools; content creation practices; and communication and collaboration skills. As students progress through their two years in the M-School, they begin to apply what they have learned throughout the course sequencing to subsequent courses in an iterative approach (see Table 1). They enter the *competent* or *ri* stage, by learning to apply theory, terms, and concepts as well as by recognizing and learning to deal with, and embrace, the ambiguity associated with creating marketing strategies and selecting relevant data. Employing a cohort approach and a sequential curricular design serves to introduce and reinforce key concepts to the students throughout the two-year program.

Transdisciplinary Agile Teamwork

The need for, and importance of, learning across disciplines has long been discussed as an approach to promoting deeper learning (Albers-Miller, Straughan, & Prenshaw, 2001; Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001). The topic becomes even more pressing as the marketing discipline and roles evolve beyond traditional responsibilities and practices such as customer relationship building, campaign development and messaging, distribution, and product development. The discipline is moving into an entirely new realm of marketing outputs, including building complex digital platforms such as mobile apps, augmented- and virtual-reality experiences, and measuring customer acquisition and retention. Teams in these contexts may consist of individuals from diverse backgrounds with differing skills and perspectives beyond the marketing discipline.

Indeed, the new demands and skills required to create these new platforms have led marketing managers to rethink team formation and the processes by which they work and create. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, the authors describe how marketing projects traditionally have followed the *waterfall process*, where roles and responsibilities flow from one group to the next until a final deliverable has been met (Rigby et al., 2016). For example, the typical advertising agency project flow might involve a time-consuming process beginning with a client request to an account management team. The account manager, with the brand strategy team, then develops a campaign strategy and creative brief. The strategy team subsequently briefs the creative team responsible for coming up with the creative concept(s). Once a concept is selected by the client, work then flows to the agency production team responsible for producing the campaign. Finally, the finished creative assets flow to the media team, which then places the media in the appropriate channel. In this process, each discipline may take up to eight weeks to complete their respective task, which explains why something as seemingly simple as a television commercial often takes up to one year to hit the airwaves.

Now, marketing teams that are tasked with building complex digital products, services, or platforms increasingly adopt what is known as the *agile method*, an approach with roots in software development and commonly referred to as a *scrum*, a reference to the sport of rugby where an ordered formation of players attempts to move the ball upfield (Rigby et al., 2016). Benefits of the agile method can include higher team productivity and employee satisfaction, reduced waste, and faster speed to market. In this approach, rather than work flowing from team to team in a linear handoff, a small transdisciplinary team of experts is formed and then given an objective, a budget and target deliverable date. In the agile method, teams will also engage in *sprints* where they create concepts within short timelines. By forming transdisciplinary teams of students and using time-bound objectives, we have sought to incorporate the agile method within students' team work and processes.

As an example, in an M-School elective course titled *Making Virtual a Reality*, cotaught by an M-School faculty and a virtual reality industry expert, students employ the agile method by forming four multidisciplinary "agile" teams, each consisting of a student from different disciplines and majors (computer science, graphic design, film,

Table 1. Course Development Stages and Learning Outcomes.

Course	Development stage	Experiential learning dimensions
The New World of Branding and Advertising	Novice to Advanced Beginner	• Off-campus industry-led sessions (e.g., live case study challenges and ideation workshops). • Marketing for Good Project, where student teams conceptualize and execute a social justice campaign for their community. • Semester-ending Pitch Event where student teams present their Marketing for Good campaigns to faculty and industry professionals.
Brand Planning and Strategy	Advanced Beginner	• Live client brand strategy project (past clients have included Nestle SweeTARTS®, thinkThin® Energy Bars, and Taco Bell). • Client check-ins. • Client and project management by teams. • Semester-ending brand strategy presentation to client.
Cross-Platform Content Creation	Advanced Beginner	• Creative Shoot Out project where student teams work with a nonprofit or for-profit organization to develop branded content across online, social media, and mobile platforms. • Client check-ins. • Client and project management by teams. • Semester-ending content strategy presentation to client.
Adaptive Media and Analytics	Advanced Beginner to Competent	• Paid search and social media campaign creation and execution employing Google AdWords and Facebook. • Paid search and social media budget management. • Semester-ending adaptive media strategy presentation.
Creative Brand Leadership	Competent	• Capstone course involving the development of a fully integrated Go To Market campaign incorporating skills and competencies developed throughout the previous four courses.

marketing, and entrepreneurship). Teams are tasked to address on-campus issues using augmented and virtual reality. Such issues include (a) increasing awareness among faculty, students, and staff of the importance of diversity and inclusion; (b) enhancing recruiting practices for the school's men's soccer team; (c) promoting empathy and understanding for people with disabilities, or (d) generating greater awareness of, and interest in, the LMU library's array of special collections. Combining clear course deliverables with frequent in-class check-ins, the teams are required to perform a series of sprints to determine and execute all aspects of their respective virtual or augmented reality project from ideation to creation. By applying the agile method in a project characterized by ambiguity and complexity, teams are able to produce content that meet the course goals and learning objectives within a relatively short seven-week time period.

In summary, the four teaching approaches of experiential learning, PBL, skill development, and agile teamwork are intended to address the need for pedagogical change in marketing education resulting from the digital revolution. These are implemented through transdisciplinary teamwork on relatively new and complex topics and industry challenges, through hands-on, real-world activities in each session, and through semester-long, industry-involved projects. All assignments include reflection and coaching and are focused on specific practical and metaskills. Each of these is reflected in our curriculum and content, described below.

Addressing the Digital Challenge: A Digital-First Curriculum

To address the digital challenge facing industry recruiters, the five required courses within the M-School curriculum each incorporate a digital-centric project with specific learning and skill development outcomes (see Table 2). Importantly, the M-School takes a programmatic approach toward digital-first curriculum development, such that the two-year program's courses build on one another and are part of a whole that treats all of marketing as digital.

- In the foundational first course of the M-School program called the New World of Branding and Marketing, students engage in the *Marketing for Good* project, whereby teams create and execute campaigns to effect positive change within their community. Examples of team project executions have included increasing awareness of food waste, creating and delivering branded raincoats to the area homeless during a recent *El Nino* rainy season, and a campaign to raise the level of political discourse on campus. Teams' campaign executions are centered on promoting positive attitudinal and behavioral change through digital media such as Facebook and Instagram and are supported with an industry funding platform called the *Idea Accelerator Fund* that enables student teams to spend real money and manage real budgets

Table 2. Project-Based Skill Development and Outcome Assessment.

Course project	Skill development	Learning outcomes and assessment
Marketing for Good	• Idea generation and campaign development • Conduct primary and secondary research • Online and offline audience development and online content creation (social media, video) • Campaign performance measurement • Digital content development • Presentation skills	• Students develop an understanding of the steps involved in creating an idea, promoting that idea, and influencing behavioral change to a defined audience. • Students learn to measure campaign performance by identifying key metrics and performance indicators. • Students learn to manage the project development process through frequent faculty and industry mentor check-ins. • Direct assessment takes place through their campaign performance.
Brand Planning and Strategy	• Conduct primary and secondary research • Insight generation, brand positioning and audience definition • Cultural trend tracking • Creative brief development • Content development • Client and project management and presentation skills	• Students develop a deep understanding of how to develop brand strategy. • Indirect assessment takes place through their semester-long brand strategy project presentation attended by the representatives from the project client.
Creative Shoot Out	• Storytelling through branded content: Storyboard creation/Video production and editing/Website and mobile app design presentation skills (deck development and oral presentation)	• Students develop a deep understanding of how to develop an integrated content strategy involving both offline (experiential) and online content and media. • Indirect assessment takes place through their semester-long Creative Shoot Out presentation attended by the representatives from the project client.
Paid Search and Paid Social Media	• Google AdWords: paid search campaign development and execution • Google Analytics • Facebook Advertising and Insights • Presentation skills (how to present data-intensive campaign performance)	• Students develop an understanding of how to create and execute a paid search (Google AdWords) and paid social (Facebook) campaign. • Students learn and apply campaign optimization techniques based on weekly campaign performance metrics and A/B testing. • Direct assessment takes place through semester-long project and campaign performance.

dedicated to driving engagement with their respective Marketing for Good causes.

- In the Cross-Platform Content Creation course, students participate in *The Creative Shoot Out*, a project in which teams work on creating actual online (e.g., website), mobile (e.g., mobile apps) and social media content for a specific for-profit or nonprofit organization. In past semesters, organizations included a global aerospace parts manufacturer, a private elementary school, and a film documentary about a school for disabled children in Dublin, Ireland. The course faculty work with representatives from the focal organization to develop a detailed project brief, similar to what might be used in industry practice, in order to guide the student teams to develop content areas that are most relevant to the organization.
- In another course, Brand Planning and Strategy, student teams work with a live client looking to extend or solidify its presence within the youth market with a digital-centric strategy. Past clients have included Nestle's SweeTARTS® candy brand, The *Los*

Angeles Times newspaper, Nature's Way Alive! vitamins and Taco Bell's corporate social responsibility initiative. Using a combination of foundational approaches (e.g., situational analysis, primary research, brand positioning, cultural trend tracking) combined with big data research and analysis tools (e.g., Netbase social listening, Google Trends, Simmons Market Research), teams are tasked to analyze the client's brand, category, and competitive landscape. Teams then develop and evaluate potential positioning territories with consumers, create a customer journey "touchpoint" plan and build proof-of-concept activation platforms, all focused within the digital and social media space. Regular client check-ins and coaching from industry experts help guide student teams as they develop their respective brand strategy.

- Finally, in the senior-level Adaptive Media and Analytics course, students create and execute a *Paid Digital Media Campaign* involving the Google AdWords online search and Facebook Advertising platforms for the same projects they created and

launched within the *Marketing for Good* project a year earlier. In addition to creating a bridge between two course projects and courses, this project immerses students in learning how to create, launch, and optimize Google AdWords and Facebook advertising campaigns that are funded through industry and program development funds. Each of these course-specific projects places digital marketing at the core of the students' learning and experience.

The 4Cs: Future Proof and Real-World Ready

In addition to specific digital marketing skills, the M-School's digital-first curriculum seeks to provide students with metaskills across four areas we call the *4Cs: Creativity, Critical Thinking, Collaborative*, and *Communication* skills. The "Partnership for 21st Century Learning" (2018) has identified these skills and competencies as vital to the 21st-century workplace. By incorporating the 4Cs in the development of higher level metaskills, we seek to prepare our students for the challenges and ambiguity facing them when they land their first job. In short, to prepare them to be *future proof* and *real-world ready.* Table 3 highlights the curricular approach, benefits, and assessment related to each of these four modern-day competencies.

Creativity

First, fostering creative work and skills within the curriculum helps our students enter the workforce with adaptability and flexibility. Through course projects that involve students in presenting quantitative data with storytelling approaches and creating branded content to benefit a nonprofit organization, students learn to deal with the inherent ambiguity and messiness that they will invariably face when entering the work place. In this way, creativity and experimentation—creating concepts and ideas that are both unique and useful and add value; and being open to new ideas and concepts—helps prepare students for life after graduation. Moreover, a recent study conducted by Adobe (2014) identified creativity and problem solving as two of the most in-demand skills for the 21st-century workforce.

Critical Thinking

Second, the PBL method engages and develops students' critical thinking skills when they execute and optimize multichannel (offline and online) campaigns for their *Marketing for Good* projects as well as when they analyze Google Analytics and AdWords and Facebook data, or undergo A/B testing and optimization for their paid search and paid social campaigns.

Collaboration

Third, students learn how to effectively manage group work and dynamics (e.g., team formation, the agile method, how to provide and receive feedback, team roles, and accountability) in the numerous team projects on which they work.

Communication

Fourth, through the frequent small- and large-scale presentations that individuals and teams make in almost every class session, students hone the written and verbal communication and presentation skills that are so important to their future success. Through this approach, students also learn the importance of engaging their audience when presenting new concepts and complex data through storytelling and by defending their assumptions, opinions, and insights. This approach is consistent with findings from prior research (M-School, 2016) highlighting the importance of effective communication as one of the top four traits among strong entry-level marketing and advertising candidates.

Program Assessment

Assessment of the effectiveness and sustainability of the M-School program includes both quantitative components (including achievement of learning outcomes and student placement rates) and qualitative evaluations of program effectiveness from students as well as industry partners. In the next sections, we report on program assessment and evaluation data over a three-year (from 2015 to 2017) period.

Assessing Learning Outcomes

The associated learning outcomes for each project (as highlighted in Table 2) involve digital skill development. Depending on the course and project, learning outcomes include the development of online audiences using Facebook's robust audience insights tools, the creation of social media content and targeting methods across specific audiences, understanding the digital landscape to uncover disruptive consumer and cultural insights, and understanding how to create paid search campaigns using Google AdWords' advertising platform (including keyword development, campaign architecture, and keyword bidding).

To assess the success of the M-School program in achieving the learning objectives listed in Table 2, we compared students' evaluations of the extent to which course learning outcomes were effectively addressed relative to the overall average within the College of Business Administration. Between 2015 and 2017, based on 505 M-School student responses across 6 semesters, the average score for "learning outcomes effectively addressed" within M-School courses was 4.86 (on a scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* and

Table 3. The 4Cs.

21st-Century skills and competencies	Curricular approach	Real-world benefit	Assessment
Creativity	• Develop and work from creative briefs, gain experience creating ideas, concepts, and content (Facebook, Instagram), website, mobile app concepts, and user interface design. • Integrate in-class brainstorming methods. • Learn from failure.	• Flexible thinking and novel solutions. • Potential for greater academic achievement. • Employers seek job candidates with strong creativity skills. • Individual creativity is linked to organizational innovation and work teams with higher performance.	• Ideas evaluated by fluency (the number of relevant ideas), flexibility (the number of different categories into which those ideas fall), originality (the novelty of ideas) and elaboration (the amount of detail to support an idea). • Evaluate novelty or distinctiveness of contributions relative to conventional solutions. • Gauge relevance or utility in relation to the predefined task and objectives.
Critical thinking	• Apply brand strategy tools, develop media strategy, generate consumer insights, conduct and apply research, identify relevant data (metrics and key performance indicators), track campaign performance over time, optimize campaign performance.	• More prepared for the workforce. • Potential for greater academic achievement. • A crucial skill for college graduates and employers. • Improved academic outcomes related to writing and presenting.	• Collect a mix of evidence from critical thinking activities (e.g., firsthand observation or real-time performance data). • Feedback provided at the skill level (e.g., argument analysis) and task level (e.g., logical conclusion to argument).
Collaboration	• Work in project-based teams, assign roles and responsibilities based on skills and interests, apply the Agile Method to project workflow, learn to work across disciplines and majors, meet tight timelines for deliverables, learn to accept and embrace ambiguity in project-based team work.	• Leads to greater performance in team settings. • Enhances prospects for employment and job advancement following graduation.	• Measured by peer evaluations, requiring and reviewing planning documents as well as prevalence of shared documents (e.g., Google Docs).
Communication	• Develop confidence in oral presentation and written skills, learn to give and receive peer and industry expert feedback, manage client-student relationships, apply storytelling principles, and foundations to creative and data-driven presentations.	• Associated with improved interpersonal relationships and outcomes. • Communication skills have been linked to higher graduation rates and higher grades. • Enhances prospects for employment and job advancement following graduation.	• Align and evaluate specific skills (e.g., persuasion, defense, conviction, inspiration, clarity). • Approximate real-world communications scenarios in course settings. • Integrate peer scoring and feedback.

5 = *strongly agree*) compared with 4.43 for the college from 5,290 students. A z test reveals that this difference is statistically significant ($z = 5.863$, $p < .01$ two-tailed).

Assessing Overall Program Impact

Additionally, we conduct an annual assessment of industry placement rate of M-School students six months after graduation. We examined students' LinkedIn profiles beginning with the 2015 graduating M-School cohort. Results show that almost 90% of M-School students indicate full-time employment within the marketing field (for instance, at an advertising or media agency, consumer products company, or in a marketing role at a start-up firm). Students' qualitative responses to open-ended questions regarding course effectiveness during the same period (from 2015 to 2017), summarized in Table 4, provide an assessment of the course content and engagement, skill development, and preparation for future careers that are representative of the overall student responses.

We also solicit industry feedback with respect to the two primary learning outcomes highlighted in Figure 1: (a) the extent of students' skill development and (b) the perception that M-School students are "future proof and real-world ready." Industry partners' evaluative comments, summarized in Table 5, are representative of overall industry feedback regarding the program.

Table 4. Student Evaluations of the M-School Program: What Did You Find Most Beneficial About This Course?.

Response category	Verbatim comment
Course content and engagement	• "This course provided an invaluable space for exposure to experimentation with such a new and exciting medium (virtual reality). Also, the visits to the VR start-ups were an incredible opportunity to see how the industry is developing and what opportunities are available." (Fall, 2017) • "Pushed us to become comfortable with being uncomfortable while working with new technologies." (Fall, 2017) • "I liked the agency visits and how they matched what we were working on in the course." (Spring, 2017) • "This course was challenging because the client was challenging. At first I felt discouraged, but now I feel proud for producing great work." (Spring, 2015)
Skill development	• "Hands-on learning. Managing and controlling our real-life campaigns took a lot of effort and responsibility." (Fall, 2017) • "Very applicable tools/concepts for the workplace. Especially the Google AdWords certification." (Fall, 2017) • "The tools that we can use later like the Brand Engagement Filter." (Spring 2016) • "Pitching every week at different agencies." (Spring, 2015)
Preparation for future careers	• "Everything in this class is something I feel like I will use in my life." (Spring, 2017) • "Getting to work with a really cool "real-life" brand. Super cool!" (Spring, 2017) • "Finally an applicable work prep class!" (Spring, 2017) • "This class prepared me to be a strong applicant and stand out in a meaningful and positive way." (Spring, 2016) • "This course was way better than core marketing courses. It provided me with real-life experience." (Spring, 2016) • "This was one of the best courses I have taken at LMU. It helped me prepare for applying for jobs and everything we worked on was very applicable to the real world. (Spring, 2015) • "It was amazing. Best class I've taken in my life! It has changed me so much! Learned so many new things. Such a great experience." (Fall, 2015)

Note. LMU = Loyola Marymount University.

Table 5. Industry Evaluations of the M-School Program.

Response category	Verbatim comment
Skill development	• "The M-School provides graduating students a clear competitive advantage applying for jobs within the ad industry. They leave with a foundation of theoretical knowledge, practical skills to help them succeed immediately, and the polish of seasoned veterans. M-School students have a more realistic set of expectations for the first few years of their career, and are more equipped to handle the day to day rigors of the job. Due to the hands-on experience of the curriculum, they have a greater propensity to know what they're good at, and which role within the agency would be the best fit. I get calls and emails at the end of every semester from HR departments asking for my list of the best students. They're getting jobs in a competitive market, at some of the country's best agencies. It's truly an invaluable experience." Account Manager, 72andSunny (advertising agency) • "As advertisers and agencies follow consumers' lead into the digital world, LMU's M-School is the only program I am aware of that is meaningfully adapting their curriculum to prepare students for today's professional marketing environment. LMU is uniquely situated because of its close proximity to the nation's leading agencies and technology platforms. This allows for industry professionals to integrate with the M-School faculty, and classrooms to shift from campus to agency pitch rooms to YouTube studios to Facebook training halls. The subjects covered in the Adaptive Media and Analytics course are so up-to-date, that new creative formats and platform feature changes are discussed in class *as they happen.* By giving the students an opportunity to manage real budgets promoting their projects though Google and Facebook, the Adaptive Media course not only gives the students applicable skills - it even gives them applicable *experience.* The result of all this, of course, is graduating students with highly coveted skills." Global Lead, Search & Performance, OMD Media Arts Lab (agency of record for Apple)

Table 5. (continued)

Response category	Verbatim comment
Future proof and real-world ready	• "This program bridges the gap between industry need and entry-level readiness like nothing I have witnessed before. Students are learning ever changing real-world skills from industry leaders and entering the workforce prepared for success. I can personally attest to the value put on candidates coming out of the program. They meet and beat expectation every time, and that's rewarded. I am interested to see where our business goes with a more prepared workforce on the horizon." Account Manager, Anomaly (advertising agency) • "Part of the ambition of the M-School is to develop 'real-world ready' students. Not book-smart students who only have an appreciation for the accepted rules of marketing, but modern-day thinkers and doers capable of writing some new rules of their own. Over several years, Team One has had the privilege of collaborating with a number of M-School students who personify what it means to be real-world ready." Chief Strategy Officer, Team One (advertising agency) • "The M-School at LMU continues to be a great source of talent for the marketing industry. The real-world curriculum and instructors prepares undergrads for the fast-paced, ever-changing advertising industry. M-School gives them practical skills and experience that affords them an advantage as they seek internships and, ultimately, a career in the industry. By working directly with industry experts and, not only studying, but creating real-world marketing solutions, they step into the world confident, experienced and ready to take on the industry." Executive Director, ThinkLA (industry consortium of advertising and media agencies)

M-School faculty are assessed in two ways. Full-time, tenure-track and clinical faculty that teach within the M-School are evaluated by semester course evaluation ratings (both quantitative and qualitative), ongoing peer reviews, extent and quality of relevant research in both scholarly and managerial publications, and the depth of industry engagement (e.g., attending industry events and workshops, consulting). Since M-School courses are often cotaught with industry professionals, we assess adjunct (part-time) M-School faculty based on depth of course-related knowledge, teaching effectiveness, and active engagement in mentoring and guiding students in their respective career pathways and aspirations.

Conclusion and Implications for Curriculum Development

Undertaking efforts to disrupt and evolve the way students are taught and exposed to the fast-changing world of marketing have never been so important as they are today. Failing to do so is tantamount to trying to meet the needs of the future of higher education by simply doing what has been done in the past. So much of what takes place in marketing practice today centers on digital technology (e-commerce, online search and social media, websites, and mobile). To address this, we propose in this article that marketing curricula must also treat digital marketing not as a stand-alone course or courses, but rather as a centerpiece of the overall marketing curriculum. Marketing educators should view digital and marketing as one in the same and seek to embed digital within the entire curriculum in a manner which blends online, social media, and mobile practices as well as shifts in consumer behavior from course to course. This approach is particularly important as we consider the myriad new developments that are influencing marketing practice today, such as the evolution of augmented reality applications, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, as well as the potential for blockchain technology to enhance marketing processes such as online ad buying and placement (Conick, 2017).

Programmatic Curriculum and Specialization

As described earlier, some approaches to addressing digital disruption utilize the development of specific, digitally focused courses. As an alternative, we propose course and curriculum development in a programmatic, rather than a course-by-course, basis. The M-School program and its digital-first marketing curriculum is just one approach that emphasizes the role of experiential learning through PBL to expose students to real-world applications and decision making. We argue that students' skill development in such a program should also take place across specific as well as metaskills including creative, critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills, and agility in team work to ensure that students are future-proof and real-world ready on graduation.

To place the M-School program in the context of the overall Marketing major at LMU, the M-School is now one of four focused curriculum and career "pathways" within the major. As mentioned previously, the M-School is largely focused on the customer experience and demand generation in the new digital era (customer-focused). The other three pathways include courses in the thematic areas of Creating Customer and Company Value (company-focused), Marketing Analytics (data-focused), and Applied Learning in Societal Transformation (society- and culture-focused).

These different areas allow for student and instructor specialization that matches with varying interests and industry demands. In addition to the creation of course content within the M-School curriculum, we have sought to embed elements of teaching pedagogy such as experiential learning, the progression of student development, PBL, skill development, team formation and project work processes, and what we refer to as the 4Cs (cultivating creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration) within all four pathways to more fully integrate digital within the overall curriculum.

Implementation Challenges

The challenges that we face in seeking to develop a marketing curriculum such as the M-School that keeps pace with the rapid industry, technological, and social changes have been numerous. They include managing the role and scope of industry involvement, growing the program and building scalability to meet student demand, and confronting the realities involved in transdisciplinary teaching.

The first challenge is that faculty and administrators should recognize the specialized nature of many of the classes and topics inherent in a digital-first curriculum as well as the time- and effort-intensive nature of developing and teaching such courses. This includes the added complexity resulting from codeveloping and coteaching courses with qualified industry adjunct or part-time faculty. Close industry involvement also results in more complex course delivery mechanisms, including arranging for and scheduling guest speakers and session leaders as well as choreographing off-campus class sessions at partner companies and agencies so that the visits and material aligns with course objectives. Similarly, developing close and meaningful industry connections requires academic leaders to have a source of relationships from which to forge and nurture these connections; this is where university career centers, alumni associations, and organizations like ThinkLA, the 4As, and the Advertising Educational Foundation can often provide assistance.

The second challenge involves scaling and expanding such a program to meet student demand within and outside the major. College administration must be willing to invest in and devote the sufficient resources to recruiting and training qualified full- and part-time faculty and reduce barriers that may prevent students outside the marketing major (such as film, computer science, and entrepreneurship students) from enrolling in a series of courses that, administratively, may apply to and count only toward a specific major.

This leads to *the third challenge*, which is that educators and administrators must recognize and reduce the barriers to promoting transdisciplinary teaching by cross-listing courses across colleges and majors, promoting courses to prospective students beyond one's department or college, and providing incentives for and coordinating faculty from different disciplines to codevelop and coteach these courses. We have found that negotiating the institutional and administrative barriers for transdisciplinary course development can be more of a challenge than the course development itself.

In conclusion, it is our hope that our experiences and the lessons we have learned from building and growing the M-School initiative will help inform and inspire the development of even more innovative and progressive marketing programs and curricula in the service of our students and industry.

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