**Case Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>Advanced Creative Project in Advertising</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Advertising, alternative to dissertation, business solution, creative projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract:</td>
<td>This case study details a two semester 40 credit (1/3 of a final year work load) module that is offered as an alternative to a dissertation for students taking an undergraduate (single or joint honours) degree in Advertising. The course is taught in the School of Creative Arts and Humanities at Trinity College, Carmarthen. The course makes extensive use of case studies developed with local businesses and organisations. Students work in groups or 'virtual' agencies to deal with the case study and present their solutions to representatives of the businesses in a competitive 'pitch'. The module offers a number of benefits: the students gain experience of working to 'real world' problems and developing high level skills; the businesses involved benefit from having tailor made creative solutions developed for them for actual problems they may be encountering. The course has proven very successful and in a number of instances the businesses have used the student's work.</td>
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**Introduction**

This case study describes a two-semester, final-year module that focuses on developing creative advertising solutions for real world business problems. The module is used instead of a traditional dissertation and is taken by undergraduates reading for a degree in Advertising (either joint or single honours) in the School of Creative Arts and Humanities at Trinity College, Carmarthen. The School of Creative Arts is geared very much towards a 'theory and practice' approach and considerable effort is put into preparing students for employment in the creative sector. Accordingly, this module, as with others offered by the School, is concerned with developing industry useful skills that are supported by a critical engagement with current practice.

Many students undertake courses in advertising with the intention of obtaining work as a 'creative': working as a copywriter, a 'visualiser' or an art director. Indeed, it is a common perception that advertising is a glamorous, dynamic and exciting field – a belief advanced by the various trade publications and award ceremonies (Brierly, 2002, p.54). *Campaign*, a trade journal, asserted that in spite of the modest starting salaries (circa £18000 for a junior account executive – a common graduate entry point) advertising continued to attract graduates over other careers such as management consultancy because of “the variety, the stimulation and the sheer damn sexiness of the ad business” (Watts, 2003). While the veracity of this statement is debatable, advertising is undoubtedly an industry that continues to attract numerous graduate applications.

Unfortunately, students and graduates tend to find it difficult to break into advertising, particularly the creative side. Jobs in creative positions in advertising agencies are highly desired and competition is stiff. Ironically those students who
have taken degrees in advertising may actually find it harder than those who have taken other degrees. As Brierly (2002, p.57) notes, advertising agencies often do not employ graduates with advertising degrees.

There are, however, many jobs allied to creative roles in full-service advertising agencies, media buying agencies and directly with the advertising and marketing departments of companies and organisations. One intention of this course was to make students aware of, and give them some experience of a range of different roles in addition to the purely creative roles that are normally the focus of the large production element of an advertising degree.

Background of Students
Depending upon the specific degree pathway the student is enrolled upon they have a choice to take this module, a large production module or a more traditional dissertation. This decision is made towards the end of their second year during a module ‘fayre’ where all final year modules are chosen. Students are advised by academic members of staff and must have taken certain perquisite modules during their preceding years in order to have the required skills for the module. Thus students enrolled on the course have taken a range of courses in marketing communications, research methods, researching and planning creative solutions and media production courses in film, web and print design.

Rationale
The intention of the Advertising degree pathway was not to produce students who were either singly graphic designers or marketers. Rather, graduates would have a good appreciation of the key issues in the total activity of advertising: research, media planning, high level production skills, client facing skills and project management. The intention of this module was to provide an opportunity to bring all these skills together.

The module has been developed over a period of years and its current form offers a number of advantages. Firstly, it offers a valuable alternative to the traditional final year dissertation. Students who possess a degree in advertising are usually well able to perform to academic standards in the field. However, it has been noted by advertising specialists that graduates are often not ready to enter the workforce and perform as professionals. This problem arises because of a focus upon work of a primarily academic nature in colleges and universities and a lack of ‘realism’ in both the determination and assessment of student work. This is quite understandable, as the activity of advertising professionals may not be easily assessed with traditional academic techniques. This module, and specifically its assessment system, was developed to address this issue – to offer advertising students the opportunity to produce academically sound work by engaging in activity that replicates industry practices. The design and assessment of the module is in accordance with the QAA framework benchmark statement for Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies, specifically point 6.3.4 related to the use of a large creative project in the final year (2002). As the module stands as an alternative to a traditional dissertation it has slightly different learning outcomes to a dissertation, a difference that is shared with other creative projects offered as alternatives to traditional dissertations. Accordingly learning outcomes emphasise the demonstration of competency in research; production technical and management skills; critical engagement; a systemic understanding of the particular field; appreciation of ethical concerns; and understanding and application of conceptual thought to production processes.

Secondly, students engage in activity that is identical or very similar to the practices of industry and gain skills directly applicable to the workplace, an aim explicitly identified in the Leitch Review (2006). Students gain valuable skills desired by the industry. A recent report by the skills sector council for advertising Creative and
Cultural Skills identified shortages in “creative, administration, and production & traffic roles” in the advertising industry while “35% of agencies have an internal skills gap” (Creative and Cultural Skills, 2007). Moreover, students taking the module are exposed to real world problems and develop creative solutions to meet these problems, a goal noted by the Cox Report into creativity in British businesses (Cox, 2005).

Thirdly, the module presents a considerable opportunity for local businesses and organisations to avail themselves of creative approaches to their work that they may not previously have considered. The students often produce very useful information and solutions for the organisations and companies and on a number of occasions the companies and organisations have made use of the students work. This activity closely fits with a number of initiatives at national (Creative and Cultural Skills, 2007) and international level (Anon., 2007). Furthermore, it demonstrates a similarly identified intention the application of solutions from the creative sector to business problems, (Wiesand and Söndermann, 2005).

**Description**

The course is a third year two semester module that carries the same weight as a traditional dissertation (40 credits of a level 6 120 credit workload) and the module stands in place of a dissertation for students taking the advertising pathway and is an elective for joint pathway students who do not wish to take either a traditional dissertation or other large production project. Between 15-20 students take the course annually as part of a joint or single honours advertising degree.

The course involves students working in groups and responding to advertising ‘briefs’, sets of concise requirements for specific advertising needs that are developed by the tutor in partnership with external companies and organisations. Over the course of the year the students will be presented with at least six different briefs. To address the brief the students are formed into groups or virtual ‘agencies’ and each student takes on a different role within the agency:

- Desk research – doing all the background research for the project;
- Media planner and buyer – choosing and costing media channels;
- Conceptual work – producing creative ideas for the solution based upon the organisation brand, product selling points, research and media channel;
- Execution – finalising graphic and copy work into examples of the adverts;
- Presentation – client liaison and ‘pitching’ the idea;
- Project manager – overseeing the project, managing workflow and producing the final project documentation.

The student agencies research and develop advertising solutions to the briefs and then ‘pitch’ to representatives from the external companies or organisations as well as to academic members of staff. When a new brief is set the students form new agencies and take on a different role thus allowing each student to experience each role at least once.

The briefs detail the external organisations requirements and issues they wish to be addressed by their advertising and the briefs have dealt with historic problems the organisations have faced in their business practice and in several instances ‘live’, current problems have been given to the students.

One recent example of a ‘live’ brief was developed with a local driving school that wished to launch in a new area. The tutor and the owner of the driving school met and decided upon a concise description of the problem: how to reach those who may wish to learn to drive in a new locale. The students formed two ‘agencies’ and then carried out research upon the local business environment, the costs of the school’s
competitors, the best media channel to reach the target audience, a concept that would distinguish the school from the competitors and ‘mock-ups’ of the actual adverts. The two student agencies then ‘pitched’ their ideas to the owner of the driving school and the tutor.

The assessment of the student work is carried out in two ways - the external member evaluates from a commercial point of view, decides which ‘agency’ would win their business and provides valuable feedback. The academic staff offers additional feedback from a more academic standpoint. Grades are determined primarily by the academic staff but input is sought from the organisation.

Following the team pitches students complete a further brief on their own and this is presented to the tutor in a final presentation at the end of the course. The students also submit a personal reflection of their experiences on the course following their final pitch.

Support
The teams usually have between 3 weeks to a month to prepare each pitch. During this time the students meet regularly amongst themselves and have a scheduled meeting with the tutor as a group once a week to discuss progress and problems. Peer support and feedback is strongly encouraged, and once initial reservations are overcome this support tends to be constructive yet quite critical. This form of group support is quite different from traditional dissertations and it is intended to reflect the nature of working practices in the industry.

The students also have full access to the technical support offered by the School’s technical demonstrator to assist in more technically orientated issues.

Reflection
The course has been developed and refined over a number of years and now works well. It certainly broadens the students’ experience and provides them with the valuable practice of working to ‘real’ briefs and pitching to ‘real’ clients. Furthermore, the feedback from the outside organisations and companies has proven invaluable to the students. This helps the students see their work not only in terms of meeting academic standards but also of relating their work to external factors and making valuable contacts with industry.

The outside companies have also gained from the experience and as noted above, on more than one occasion the external organisations have made use of the work the students produced.

Problems encountered include:
- Problems in securing enough external partners to work with;
- It can be difficult to arrange mutually convenient times for external partners to come in and see the students' work;
- Overcoming a contradictory tension in that some students do not take the work seriously while others are very worried about presenting their work to outsiders;
- Issues concerning the reflexive nature of the work occurred initially but these have been addressed by the inclusion of a reflexive journal as part of the students’ submission;
- The perennial problem of group work in that students often complain that their fellow group members are not working hard enough. This was partly solved through; appointing a project manager; gaining the consent of the group to abide by the project manager’s decisions; regular meetings and ensuring that marks were allocated to the role the student performed on the project rather than a single group mark.
In terms of suggestions for the future: we are developing more substantial links with certain local businesses and looking at ways in which the students can continue their relationship with the businesses after graduation; we are developing links with advertising agencies who provide us with case studies of their work and other industry material; we are looking at ways of extending the idea of industry links with other fields of study in the School.

References


