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Impact of Professional Certifications and Practical Learning On the University Student

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Abstract

There is an increasingly pressing need for universities to prepare competent professionals capable of innovation in professional and social settings. Educators are challenged to develop practical approaches to teaching and using technology to increase participation, student learning, and reduce the gap between what is taught in the classroom and the skills required by the job market. Industries and students generally value curricula that emphasize practical experience. This article presents three academic projects that prepare students for their first job and to be agents of change by providing authentic, 'hands-on' learning or based on real situations. Additionally, it introduces the use of professional certifications and how they are effectively integrated into academic curricula. Both efforts, learning by doing and professional certifications, have been conducive to preparing trained professionals to carry out their work and innovate in the environments in which they find themselves.

Keywords: innovation; learn-by-doing; practical-learning; professional certifications; professional training

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Introduction

It is very common to hear that there is a gap between what is taught in the classroom and the skills required by the job market. Students and industries generally value curricula that emphasize practical experience. Many universities offer students internships and practicums to prepare students for their first job and provide authentic hands-on or lifebased learning.

The labor market is a variable to consider when designing and developing curricula and academic projects. Industries and society in general require from universities curricula that result in capable professionals and innovative thinking. On many occasions, the labor demand, and the needs in the industry, in terms of competencies and skills of a university graduate, guide the academic offers in university education. Also, the relevance of the content in the courses, and the use of technology in learning are variables to consider when designing and developing curricula and academic projects.

For students, adding experiences to their resumes, practicing what they have learned in class, and earning professional certifications that are valued in the industry can result in valuable opportunities. These experiences and certifications translate into a differentiating element for the student when entering the labor market.

Elemento 360, Entre Medios y Multimedios: successful examples of learning by doing

Postsecondary institutions thrive on students seeking innovative learning experiences. The current generation of students wants and needs to contribute, share and disseminate real experiences and practices within their disciplines. Practical learning or learn-by-doing has several modalities and names. Namely, internships, supervised practices, work internships, applied learning, authentic learning (Monereo et al., 2012), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), among other names.

Practical learning becomes a space to apply what has been learned in different classes and exchange ideas; reasons why students are interested in it. In addition, it exposes students to dynamic environments, and with real problems to solve; it is probably an effective way for

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the student to gain self-confidence, acquire and apply knowledge and gain competencies and skills necessary in the workplace.

Traditionally, in advertising, journalism, and multimedia production study concentrations, learning is facilitated by final courses, internships, and service learning. However, based on the experience of the faculty; these courses and their experiences have limitations. Among them, they provide minimal customer contact assigned to students, and students tend to do short-term tasks that need to be repeated rather than longer managerial duties.

The assignment of real clients to students generates motivation in the classroom and is very well received, which is why the spaces that allow learn-by-doing or experiential learning facilitate the cycle in which the student experiences, reflects, thinks and acts (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 298). It is for this reason that student-led academic communication projects (called Elemento 360, Entre Medios and Multimedia) use this teaching-learning methodology as a basis.

Elemento 360, Entre Medios and Multimedia arose in response to the desire of the faculty to provide practical experiences to their students that allow them to develop their skills and enable them to innovate and contribute to the country from the university. All three academic projects are student-led and supervised by faculty.

Elemento 360 is a communication firm run by advertising and public relations students. Entre Medios is a writing group run by journalism students and they have a digital newspaper. Multimedia is run by production students, and they have two radio stations and a TV channel, all online.

All three projects work much like an ad agency, newsroom, and production house, but with a few differences. First, they have as their mentor and director a member of the faculty who supervises all administrative and creative efforts. Second, the processes of Elemento 360, Entre Medios and Multimedia, clients and projects are managed by the students. Students work

as a team to develop strategies and creative direction for specific projects or entire client campaigns.

Teams have weekly meetings with their mentors, client contracts, and orientation for new members. They use planning, creative, media and campaign briefs. In addition, each team member has their job description, approval and reporting hierarchy, interview processes for recruiting new members, and client billing. Members must comply with a work schedule, a minimum of 160 hours per semester, and periodic evaluations and at the end of the academic semester by the mentors and the work team. Client-dependent jobs include a wide range of student associations, campus administrative offices, professional associations, local small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), and nonprofit organizations.

Currently, Elemento 360 acts as manager and administrator of clients' projects. That is, it identifies and meets with potential clients, presents work proposals, if the proposal is accepted, then it assigns the Entre Medios y Multimedios students the work they will carry out for the client. Elemento 360 also handles billing for jobs.

Similarly, the projects have as goals:

1.   Provide students with work and learning experiences with real clients that allow them to enter the world of work and act as agents of change and innovation in the communication and creative industries.

2.   Encourage entrepreneurship in students so that they can also consider their own communication companies.

3.   Provide small and medium-sized businesses and non-profit companies with quality services.

The three academic projects are focused on contributing to the development of a complete and comprehensive graduate who seeks to achieve success in a real world. The activities that add value to this educational experience are diverse, from having the first meeting

with the work team, preparing a proposal, doing research, writing a news item, producing an advertisement for television, to billing and collection procedures.

All the experiences lived by the students include the integration of technical skills (hard skills) and non-technical skills (soft skills). Effective communication, teamwork, the use of technology, the characteristics of a leader, research, an ethical sense, innovation, and critical analysis, are some of the competencies that a student who goes through the experience of learning by doing can develop.

Professional certifications

Digital professional certifications are earned by completing an online course of study. These certifications guarantee significant professional experience in a certain subject. In almost all cases, these programs consist of working through online modules and do not require any in-person participation.

Digital professional certifications are gaining weight with employers. Hiring managers often view candidates with relevant certifications as proficient in that subject and as someone who is willing to revitalize their professional skill set outside of formal education. These certifications are available for a wide variety of topics and platforms. Hootsuite, HubSpot, and the Google suite are some of the areas where employees can earn certification. Microsoft Office and Facebook for Journalists also offer certification programs.

Higher education institutions have used certifications as a component to evidence learning outcomes (Randall and Zirkle, 2005; Rob and Roy, 2013). The popularity of these certificate programs may be due to the perception that such certifications will aid in the employment of students. In fact, Rob and Roy (2013) indicate that students and alumni believe that certifications will help them build a better career path.

In this case, four certifications have been incorporated into the curriculum and two are used daily by Elemento 360' team: HubSpot Academy digital certification in Inbound Marketing, Hootsuite University in Hootsuite and Social Media Marketing, SpotOn Ad Intelligence and

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Sharelove. SpotOn Ad Intelligence and Sharelove are the ones used daily by students in Elemento 360 to manage clients accounts and make strategic decisions.

HubSpot is a customer relationship management platform that is widely used in the industry. HubSpot Academy offers a series of courses on marketing and sales topics. Many of these are available for free to anyone, while others are reserved for pay to HubSpot subscribers. These courses are not specifically focused on the HubSpot platform. Instead, they offer valuable content on search engine optimization, conversion analysis and reports, landing pages, lead training, blogging, and basic marketing strategies.

Hootsuite, a social media marketing company, provides a dashboard that allows users to manage a variety of social media accounts from one place. Hootsuite offers two free training courses: one for the Hootsuite platform and one for general social media marketing. The platform certifications are useful for those who use Hootsuite regularly in their work and the general social media courses are extremely valuable for anyone who wants to have a solid foundation in social media at a professional level.

SpotOn AdIntelligence is a service that provides online monitoring and tracking of digital advertising. As a big data company, they develop proprietary technology dedicated to the intelligent, accurate, capture, management, and analysis of the online data.

Sharelove is marketing collaboration platform with tools for Brands and Agencies to easily manage all their teams, projects, and assets in the cloud.

Educators are challenged to develop practical pedagogical approaches to teaching about social media and its use in the changing digital world. Integrating professional certifications into the curriculum helps students enter the professional world with skills and knowledge validated by professional organizations.

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Conclusion

Academic projects under the learn-by-doing model; Elemento 360, Entre Medios and Multimedia, have been beneficial in the students' learning process. From the perspective of their mentors, the benefits have two main aspects: 1) facilitating the student's selection of career paths and opportunities, and 2) teaching the professionalization of disciplines.
The latter is one of the most difficult areas to teach in the classroom.

Overall, students improved their learning substantially and have shown increased confidence in their talents, abilities, and intelligence. They have learned to negotiate with others, and to receive and give constructive feedback. Assuming greater responsibilities and seeking solutions to problems in their areas of study is what has led them to show confidence in themselves. Consequently, it has helped them to believe in their chances of success as entrepreneurs or employees at other firms. It has also helped them to see themselves as agents of change and innovation.

In addition, students and faculty consider that having professional certifications as part of the curriculum is essential for students' future professional careers and learning. In a highly competitive job search environment, greater confidence in mastering new applications, strategies and tools and certifications can be a differentiating factor for students entering the world of work. Similarly, you can add value in the eyes of potential employers.

Both strategies, learning by doing and professional certifications, have been fundamental to teaching and to increasing participation, student learning and reducing the gap between what is taught in the classroom and the skills demanded by the labor market. They have also contributed to the training of competent and innovative professionals.

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