

# THE MARKETING BLOG COMPETITION: INTEGRATING EDUCATIONAL BLOGGING AND ANALYTICS IN THE CLASSROOM

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## *Abstract*

*How should marketing educators teach today's technologically savvy college students the latest knowledge as well as relevant soft and hard skills for employment in a world of Web 2.0? The changing environment requires the development of innovative pedagogical approaches to enhance students' experiential learning. Recent research has focused on the idea of implementing technology and the adoption of educational blogging in the marketing curriculum. This paper outlines a semester-long marketing blog competition, in which students had to (1) create and maintain a marketing blog and (2) apply web analytics to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators. This article offers a detailed discussion of the design and implementation as well as the outcomes based on quantitative and qualitative student feedback.*

## INTRODUCTION

As marketing educators we are faced with the challenge of equipping students with various professional competencies and preparing them “to be productive employees who can communicate effectively, work well in teams and (...) demonstrate content knowledge” (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009, p. 154). Academics have often been accused of emphasizing marketing theory instead of bridging the gap between theoretical marketing principles and ‘real-world’ practice (de los Santos & Jensen, 1985). Several scholars have declared students being ill-prepared for a career in the marketing profession (Day, 1979; Ostheimer, 1977; Peters, 1980). Others point out that “the lecture format is not the most effective educational delivery mechanism, particularly in marketing” (Helms, Mayo, & Baxter, 2003, p. 18). Active learning methods are alternatively recommended in which students are empowered to think and learn for themselves (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1991). Literature on education and learning advocates, in particular, experiential learning (e.g. Gremler et al., 2000; Navarro, 2008) which refers to an interactive teaching style with new roles for teacher and students (Simpson & Pham, 2007). As employers increasingly expect that graduates have advanced information technology skills, marketing educators have adopted technology and the Internet as

instructional media (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). Furthermore, Henson, Kennett, and Kennedy (2003) note that students who have higher levels of technological orientation are more marketable for employment.

This article presents an innovative approach of teaching students relevant soft and hard skills oriented around blog-writing and the application of web analytics. In this project, students in an online marketing course were required to (1) create and maintain marketing blogs and (2) apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs). The blog project was implemented twice in an online marketing course during a 15-week spring semester in 2011 and 2012. The project aimed to provide an experiential learning experience in online marketing and to enhance students' writing and communication skills, their time management and teamwork skills, while familiarizing them simultaneously with the application of different web technologies and web analytics. As some scholars have argued, blogs are a popular marketing communication tool and new graduates are facing increasing pressure to become familiar with such technologies (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). We expect that students improve their analytical skills during this project as well as become more motivated and engaged as a marketing professional.

This article is organized as follows: The following section reviews relevant literature regarding the concept of experiential learning and the use of technology in the marketing curriculum. In addition, the blogging phenomenon is briefly described. In the following section, the authors discuss in detail the design and implementation of the blog competition. In particular, the individual and group work requirements are highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of the assessment, the grading criteria and the project's benefits which is supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence. The review of the project's effectiveness includes also a comparison of this study's quantitative results with the Kaplan, Piskin & Bol (2010) study. The paper concludes with lessons learned, recommendations for future variations, and a brief conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach whereby students experience "a task or set of tasks, and ultimately learn from their actions" (Neale, Treiblmaier, Henderson, Hunter, Hudson & Murphy, 2009, p. 7). Over the last decade, many university educators have incorporated real-world experiential learning in various disciplines including marketing-related courses, for example: principles of marketing (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp & Mayo, 2000; Drea, Engelland & Singh, 1997; Munoz & Huser, 2008), services marketing (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000), marketing communications (Luck & Chalmers, 2007), and marketing research (Bove & Davies 2009; Bridges, 1999).

Experiential learning theory dates back to Kolb (1976, 1984) who describes the learning process as a four-stage cycle: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. According to Kolb, students actively participate in experiences followed by observation and reflective abstraction (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010; Levin & Davis, 2007). Academic literature has reported various benefits associated with the concept of experiential learning: facilitating critical thinking, integrating theory into practice, improving oral and written communication, and enhancing skills in decision-making, listening, time management, and other soft skills (Garcia & Pontrich, 1996; Gremler et al., 2000; Smart, Kelley & Conant, 1999; Warren, 1997). In addition, students perceive experiential methods, particularly real-world projects, as more effective for their learning (Karns, 2005; Navarro, 2008).

### **Blogging and the Use of Technology**

Research in marketing education has addressed instructional technology from two angles: a broad view that investigates the overall integration of technology in the classroom and its outcomes on teaching and learning and a narrow view that analyses the application of particular Web 2.0 technologies via online activities and projects (Buzzard, Crittenden, Crittenden, & McCarty, 2011). Recently, a special edition in the *Journal of Marketing Education* (Vol. 33, No. 2) reviewed specific examples of technology in the classroom including social media sites such as Twitter (e.g. Lowe and Laffey, 2011; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie 2011), user-generated videos on YouTube (e.g. Payne, Campbell, and Bal, 2011) and virtual worlds such as Second Life (e.g. Halvorson, Ewing & Windisch). A few authors have emphasized the use of blogs in the classroom (e.g., Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010; Levin & Davis, 2007).

Blogging has become a mainstream activity and is now widely used in the corporate world. By the end of 2011, NM Incite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, tracked over 180 million blogs around the world, compared to only 36 million in 2006 (NielsenWire, 2012). While about 65% of bloggers are considered hobbyists (Technorati, 2012), professional blogging becomes more important. For instance, based on an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, there are more than 450,000 people in the United States making their living as bloggers – ranking second after the number of lawyers (Penn, 2009). Corporate blogging exhibits a growing trend as organizations are searching for opportunities to communicate more effectively with internal and external stakeholders (Laudon & Laudon, 2007).

While blogging is gaining popularity in the business environment, the use of blogs as an educational tool still has only received limited attention so far (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol, 2010). A few studies suggest favorable pedagogical outcomes including enhanced learning and interactivity (Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and student improvements in communication skills, creativity, and self-expression (Huffaker, 2005; Kennedy, 2003). According to Oravec (2002) blogs encourage self-expression and collaboration, which in

turn are reflected in enhanced literacy and critical thinking skills. Kaplan, Piskin & Bol (2010) incorporate educational blogging to enhance students' soft skills, such as written communication, critical thinking, effective presentation and the use of technology. While blogging itself is potentially a powerful tool for marketing education, the activity has to be interconnected with web analytics. That is, students have to learn how to measure the blog's traffic and make decisions to improve the blog's effectiveness. Thus, it is reasonable to extend the scope of the blog activity providing students with an holistic skill set pertaining to *blogging strategy* (e.g., understanding the target audience), *blogging technology* (e.g., tools and platforms), *blogging content and design* (e.g. understanding blog aesthetics, writing compelling and relevant blog posts) and *blogging performance* (e.g. integrating web analytics, search engine optimization and social media).

## PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

### Course Context

The project was implemented twice in an undergraduate course titled *e-Marketing* (also referred to as Internet Marketing, Online Marketing) at a small liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest in the United States. The course is an elective in the undergraduate curriculum for the Marketing concentration. The objective is to introduce students to the Internet and other online and mobile technologies for marketing purposes, in particular the planning, design and execution of marketing strategies and programs. Since technology and the Internet are changing rapidly and new trends have been emerging (e.g. social media marketing, blog marketing, online public relations, etc.), the instructor decided to integrate an innovative approach in the course for building and improving necessary marketing skills: The *Marketing Blog Competition* was comprised of an individual component (blog writing as part of small team of bloggers) as well as a group component (tracking and optimizing the team's blog performance).

The idea of implementing educational blogging originated from an article in the *Journal of Marketing Education* by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) in which they describe the adaption of blogging as part of a Marketing Management course. While the authors focus mainly on soft skills, including written communication and coherent expression, the instructor decided to add a second component, a group competition, in which students had to apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs). Academic literature suggests that students learn more through competitive projects (Rundle-Thiele & Kuhn, 2008; Stutts & West, 2003).

### Project design

As part of this course teams of three students set up a marketing blog on the platform *Blogger.com* and posted several blog entries during the semester. Project requirements

and instructions to set up a blog were provided in the syllabus posted on Sakai, the university's course management system (CMS) and discussed during the first day of class. Students were advised to use the Blogger platform (see Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010), instead of other blogging websites such as WordPress, for several reasons. First, the university uses Google's Apps for Education which includes the free platform Blogger, i.e. hosting is free. Since students already have a Google account, the sign-up process is relatively easy and convenient. WordPress, however, requires paid web hosting and a domain name. Second, Blogger provides a user-friendly interface and a great variety of customization, e.g. a template designer. While WordPress is more customizable, the majority of students did not have any prior blogging experience; thus Blogger appeared to be the better choice for beginners. Third, since Blogger is a Google product, it integrates seamlessly with other Google products such as Google Analytics.

After signing up an account, each team had to create a URL and blog name. Students needed to consider that the name could not be changed and that the URL would be permanent. Blog posts were allowed on any topic that was relevant to marketing and, in particular, online marketing. The syllabus included the following examples: advertising campaigns, TV commercials, new products, company acquisitions, a service experience, or changes in personal consumption preferences; however students were allowed to make their own suggestions. In other words, virtually any topic did fit as long it exhibited a link to marketing theory or practice (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010). In addition, each student was required to set up an account on *Google Reader*, a news reader, to manage blog subscriptions of all group blogs as well as five required marketing blogs (SearchEngineWatch, The Social Media Marketing Blog, Marketing Pilgrim, Online Marketing Blog and ProBlogger). Links to those blogs had to be added on each team's own blog site as well. In addition, teams were required to create an introductory post, which included a hyperlink to an outside resource (e.g. the University) and a second introductory post that explained the purpose of the blog, being a part of this course project. The *purpose* was twofold: First, students had to follow and read professional marketing blogs enhancing their marketing knowledge and critical thinking skills. Secondly, following each other blogs in class was supposed to engage students more meaningfully in this project.

### **Individual work requirements**

Each student had to individually post a minimum of one blog entry every two weeks throughout the semester. The purpose was both to ensure a minimum number of writing assignments for the semester and to maintain a balance with other class projects and assignments. The timeframe also seemed appropriate to compare blogging frequency among teams. That is, teams were supposed to develop a schedule that would demonstrate a strategic approach of frequent updates. In addition to writing blog entries, everyone was required to comment at least twice on blog postings from the 'required blogs' as well as blog postings submitted by classmates, with thoughtful responses to the

posted blog entries. Each student was also responsible for responding to the comments posted by classmates (and others who may have commented). Thus, there were a number of occasions for students to apply their skills of written communication and coherent expression.

### **Group competition**

The second project component dealt with monitoring and improving blog performance. Each group had to create an account on *Google Analytics* to analyze their blog traffic over the semester. Students had to apply textbook and classroom material such as website and blog design, search engine optimization (SEO), web analytics, etc. For example, teams had to identify and monitor key metrics and then, on a weekly basis, submit Google Analytics reports (both in Excel and pdf). At the end of the semester, all teams had to prepare a presentation summarizing their blog strategy and content, the creativity of their blog design (that is, the number/type of widgets and plugins for sharing content on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and the overall performance based on various KPIs such as pageviews, visits, unique visitors, average time on site, keywords and referrals. To make the project even more compelling, the instructor created a competition. The team with the most successful blog at the end of the semester, based on the evaluation of the instructor and two external judges, received a certificate of accomplishment and a financial award (gift cards to be redeemed at the bookstore) from the Dean of the School of Business.

## **PROJECT ASSESSMENT AND GRADING**

Blogs have unique characteristics that differentiate them from traditional communication media or other online counterparts (Park, Ahn, & Kim, 2010). At the beginning of the project, students were told that blog writing would be different from homework because all posts would become public and accessible online (Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010). Therefore, it was expected that students had to post well-structured arguments that clearly explain an issue relevant to marketing and which were in compliance with grammatical and spelling rules. Students were graded individually on:

- The quality of the posts (relevance of the entry to marketing, writing style, etc.),
- The frequency of the posts,
- The links provided within the posts,
- Presentation of material in their blog,
- Quality of commenting (responses to others, etc.).

Group grades were determined on overall blog performance which consisted of five criteria:

- **Blog structure:** choice of blog URL, use of meta tags, information about blog contributors, display of “about blog”, use of widgets and plugins (e.g. “subscribe to” button, buttons to share on Facebook and Twitter, Facebook plugin),

- **Blog design:** overall layout of blog, aesthetics of blog site, use of background and colors, font type/size;
- **Blog strategy:** clarity of blog subjects, identified target audience, reliable frequency of blog posts, team contributions, integration with Facebook page (if available);
- **Blog content:** consistency of blog posts with blog strategy, marketing relevance of blog posts, number of spelling and writing errors, quantity and quality of links and videos incorporated in each blog post;
- **KPIs and blog analytics:**
  - *Based on Blogger Stats:* number of followers, total pageviews, highest number of pageviews in a month, highest pageviews per blog topic, referrals from Facebook and Google.com;
  - *Based on Google Analytics:* visits since blog launch, average visits per day, total pageviews, unique visitors, average time on site, bounce rate, loyalty (percentage of 1 time visitors versus return visitors, traffic from search engines and referring sites, most popular keywords).

Appendix 1 illustrates the teams' performance data for an exemplary course.

In 2011, the data shows that team 4 created the most successful blog over the semester. One of the judges summarized the performance based on the content strategy and the design: "Good interesting concept that I want/need to know more about. Good information. Worth reading. [...] Simple design but it communicates and integrates well with the theme of the blog." The team achieved by far the highest number of total pageviews (according to statistics both from Blogger and Google Analytics), the highest number of pageviews per blog topic and the most referrals from Google.com. Based on the data from Google Analytics, the team also had the highest number of unique visitors; more than three times compared to the next team (749 vs. 250). Bounce rates were mostly quite high across all teams (more than 60%). This was expected since the bounce rate is higher in general for blogs. Teams 5 and 6 are showing lower bounce rates; however, those teams did not manage to track data for the whole semester. Teams 1 and 4 also achieved to gain visits via popular keywords on search engines. For example, one student of team 4 was posting a story titled "Duped by a Teacup Pig" discussing how the website Koofers, a college study network, was using a picture of a teacup pig in miniature rain boots on Facebook to increase traffic. The keyword 'teacup pig' then led to 23 visits to the team's blog story. In conclusion, the panel of judges agreed that team 4 was the winner of this blog competition.

In 2012 the data shows that also one team (Your Mobile Life) was most successful with 2,764 pageviews (Blogger Stats) and 579 unique visitors (Google Analytics). In addition to an outstanding frequency of blog posts, one the judges commented on the quality of the blog content. For example, according to the first judge, "The YML design is simple,

but the content is what draws me in. The YML content is readable, interesting and consistent. Plus, it addresses the purpose of the blog.” The second judge commented also in favor, saying: “Great template – easy to follow posts, and easy shares for each blog post. I like the one on making Mom’s life easier and app suggestions for her phone!”

In both years, some teams went beyond the project requirements and created also Facebook pages and Twitter accounts which linked back to their blog. Results show that those teams that actively promoted their blog through Facebook (i.e., increasing the number of fans) achieved to get more referrals through social media, thus increasing the overall traffic to their blog. Since this was not a required component of the project, it illustrates how (at least some) students were more engaged in this project. This may have been due to the competitive nature of this project.

### PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS AND STUDENT FEEDBACK

Besides formal course evaluations a short online survey (based on Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010) was conducted at the end of the semester to determine student satisfaction. Qualitative responses indicate that the course blog competition has been extremely successful (see TABLE 1).

TABLE 1

#### Student Feedback

<b>Question: What factors attracted you to the blog project? What did you like or enjoy?</b>	
Answers, spring 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I liked how it was different than any other project I have done in college. It was interactive and really forced me to learn and apply the information in class to our client project.</li> <li>I enjoyed the hands on experience rather than listening to a lecture. I enjoyed learning how to blog and implementing SEO strategies.</li> </ul>
Answers, spring 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I enjoyed getting to work with a real team. I also liked that all of my effort translated into direct results among students and other peers that were reading the blogs. Along with that, I think that it was cool that we could track results directly (using Analytics and Blogger stats). Instead of just relying on feedback from a person, we had responses that used actual formulas to deliver results that were worthwhile.</li> </ul>
<b>Question: How did your participation in the blog project improve your knowledge about online marketing?</b>	
Answers, spring 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By using Google Analytics and [blog] marketing, I learned how to better promote myself and whatever I am engaged in the future. This exponentially improved my knowledge about online marketing, considering I knew nothing about online marketing.</li> <li>It improved my knowledge of SEO and how to use meta-tags in html. I really enjoyed learning how to implement Google Analytics and how to analyze it. Google Analytics was my favorite part!</li> </ul>
Answers, spring 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I was able to get a full grasp on SEO and practices to ensure that our website or platform is something that people are actually seeking. [...] One other</li> </ul>



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thing that I got to learn was the importance of consistency and the use of strong content. Content is gold when it comes to online marketing – and we definitely found out how valuable a good blog post was.

- There are a lot of technical skills that one doesn't get from simply reading about in a textbook. The hands on experience really helped me with the SEO and got comfortable with websites like Blogger.
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As the feedback in both semesters indicate, students liked the hands-on experience, the flexibility to choose their own topics, the ability to design the blog's layout and the opportunity to learn and apply SEO tactics to increase their traffic. Based on increased knowledge of online marketing, the active application of website analytics and the reflection of writing relevant content for a target audience, students also described that they felt better prepared for employment after graduation.

### **QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS**

In addition to the qualitative study, a quantitative approach was applied to measure the perceived effectiveness of the project in achieving experiential learning, improvement of soft skills and technology integration (see also Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010). Enhancing the blogging project of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) we assume that our enhancement has a significant impact on the students' blogging experience and goes beyond the evaluations of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010)'s students. Thus, our approach is twofold: Using the items suggested by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) we first check if the evaluations were better than nonneutral, i.e. significantly different from the midpoint 3. This step is a replication of Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010)'s work. In the second step we compare our results to their previous work in order to examine if our project set up results in a significant difference. Furthermore, in order to avoid "single shot results" (Evanschitzky, Baumgarth, Hubbard, & Armstrong, 2007, p. 417), our project was part of the marketing education in two different student classes, one in 2011 and the other in 2012.

We used 41 items as suggested by Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) based on prior research (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007). The item "Compared to working on a team project, this project was more interesting" was excluded in our survey because students were asked to fill their blogs as a group rather than individually. Students were asked to rate these statements on 5-point Likert-type scales, with 1 being 'I completely disagree' and 5 representing 'I completely agree'. As we used the same questionnaire in both surveys, the data was aggregated for reliability analysis (n = 44). Cronbach's alpha was .97, which is satisfactorily. A summary of the results is presented in TABLE 2.

**TABLE 2**

**Overall evaluation of the marketing blog projects**

		Class 2011		Class 2012	
		M	SD	M	SD
1.	This project should be assigned to future classes.	4.04***	.95	4.25***	.91
2.	Having instructor feedback was a positive aspect of this project.	4.21***	.93	4.00***	.97
3.	This project has enhanced my awareness of marketing.	4.08***	.93	4.00***	.97
4.	This project declines the tendency to do a copy-and-paste assignment.	3.54**	.88	4.05***	.95
5.	This project was one of the best parts of this course.	3.58**	.93	3.85**	1.04
6.	This project enhanced my understanding of marketing activities.	3.96***	.69	3.90***	.91
7.	This project enhances the skills to carry on unaided research.	3.58**	.83	4.10***	1.02
8.	As a learning experience, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture.	4.29***	.81	4.35***	.75
9.	Compared to writing a term paper, this project was more interesting.	4.63***	.71	4.35***	.99
10.	This project improved my overall knowledge of marketing.	4.00***	1.06	3.90***	1.02
11.	This project helped me to realize practical applications of marketing theory.	3.71***	.95	3.95***	1.0
12.	This project increased my attention to the course in general.	3.96***	1.12	3.70**	1.08
13.	This project increased my overall satisfaction with the course.	4.00***	.93	3.70**	1.03
14.	Incorporating blogs into a project is an efficient method in general.	4.00***	.98	4.10***	.97
15.	This project enhances general observation skills.	3.58*	1.06	3.70**	.98
16.	I found having Web wanderers read my work very exciting.	3.54*	1.18	3.80**	1.15
17.	I believe that using Web technologies in a project is enjoyable.	4.29***	.91	4.25***	.97
18.	This project helped me to gain a wider perspective of marketing.	3.88***	1.08	4.05***	.95
19.	Incorporating blogs into a project is an effective method in general.	3.88***	.99	4.00***	.92
20.	Having other students read my work was a positive aspect of this project.	3.71**	1.08	4.00***	1.03
21.	This project enhances self-expression skills.	4.08***	.97	4.15***	1.09
22.	As a learning experience, this project was more productive than listening to a lecture.	4.08***	1.10	4.35***	1.04
23.	This project develops career skills.	4.00***	.93	4.35***	.93
24.	Compared to listening to a lecture, this project has motivated me to study harder for the course.	3.67**	1.01	3.70**	1.13
25.	Having peer feedback was a positive aspect of this project.	3.75***	.94	3.80**	1.06
26.	I did research on various sources to perform better on	3.46	1.22	3.85***	.99

27.	this project. This project has enabled me to make better use of class time.	3.50*	1.02	3.75**	.91
28.	This project enhances writing communication skills.	3.79**	1.10	3.90***	.97
29.	This project has increased my self-confidence.	3.38	1.10	3.40	1.0
30.	I believe the instructor better knew me throughout the project.	3.58*	1.18	3.40	1.19
31.	This project enhances the skills for proper use of language.	3.58*	1.14	3.80**	1.06
32.	This project gave me the opportunity to reach the instructor beyond class hours.	3.75***	.94	3.25	.97
33.	This project helped me to feel myself valuable.	3.54*	.98	3.60*	1.05
34.	I put a great deal of effort into this project.	3.75**	1.19	3.75**	1.02
35.	I put the knowledge I gained from this project to use in other courses.	3.92***	1.06	3.85**	1.14
36.	I had the opportunity to integrate my knowledge from other courses into this project.	4.00***	.72	3.80***	.95
37.	This project helped me to better know my classmates.	3.88***	.95	4.20***	.89
38.	I improved my skills of using web technologies throughout the project.	4.04***	1.16	4.20***	.89
39.	This project increases competitiveness between students.	3.79***	.98	4.30***	.80
40.	Because of this project. I was unable to put enough effort on other courses.	2.67	1.49	2.50	1.19
41.	The learning experience provided by this project was not worth the effort.	2.92	1.50	2.20***	.95

TABLE 2 compared the mean score of each item to the indifferent midpoint of the scale. Thus, any significant difference from the midpoint 3 implies a nonneutral opinion. One-sample t-tests show that both in the 2011 and 2012 sample four items were not significant ( $p > .05$ ). While only item 29 and item 40 are not significant in both samples, all item means in both data sets are above the midpoint 3. The last two items are reversely coded, thus the means are smaller than 3. As TABLE 2 illustrates, this project was more enjoyable than listening to a lecture ( $M_{2011}=4.29^{***}$  vs.  $M_{2012}=4.35^{***}$ ) and more interesting compared to writing a term paper ( $M_{2011}=4.63^{***}$  vs.  $M_{2012}=4.35^{***}$ ). Answers to item 4 differ quite strongly among both student cohorts. The 2011 class perceived less that the project declines the tendency to do a copy-and-paste assignment compared to the 2012 class. Furthermore, item 15 appears to have the least relevance in both student cohorts, that is, blogging does only provide limited opportunity to enhance general observation skills. Finally, results of item 29 are non-significant. Thus, we cannot conclude that the blog project contributed to increase students' self-confidence. This however contradicts at least some of the qualitative feedback. Thus, more research is needed to assess the relationship between blogging and students' self-confidence.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The blog competition was a successful innovative experiential learning activity, supporting existing literature (e.g. Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010) regarding positive outcomes of educational blogging. However, the instructor noted several limitations and challenges that varied across both student cohorts. In the following some critical issues are addressed that provide room for future improvements.

### **Choice of Topics**

Students were free to choose among a number of topics listed in the syllabus. The only requirement was that each blog had to be marketing-relevant. While most teams did comply with the requirement, the instructor experienced twice some challenges, in particular, with blogs related to beer and breweries. In both cases, the blog focused on the description of beers, restaurants' happy hour, the art of beer-making, etc. and less on the marketing efforts of beer companies. Even though the choice of topic enhanced students' motivations to blog, the instructor had to deduct points as these blogs missed the purpose of the assignment. The question arises, if instructors should further narrow down the topics or instead allow marketing-unrelated topics (e.g. food, fitness, etc.).

### **Training of Blogging Skills**

One obstacle of the blog project relates to the students' experience with blogging. While Blogger is a user-friendly platform to set up a blog, even for beginners, instructors have to teach some basic skills. The lead author faced the challenge that the content of blogging was planned to be covered during the middle of the semester, after other topics such as SEM, SEO, and Email Marketing. However, students felt somewhat lost at the beginning of the project. To "jumpstart" students' blogging skills, the instructor shared several video tutorials and guidelines on successful blogging. Furthermore, a professional blogger was invited as guest speaker who shared several examples and best practices. After year 1 the instructor decided to revise the class schedule and spend more class time at the beginning of the project to cover the basics of blogging. Overall, the authors conclude that instructors can improve the student experience by (1) inviting a professional blogger as guest speaker and (2) use class time regularly to mentor student teams.

### **Lack of Participation and Dedication**

Students in both years were engaged in two semester-long projects. Besides the blogging competition each team also participated in the Google Online Marketing Challenge (Tuzovic, Wetsch, & Murphy, 2011). Both projects are demanding exercises that require students to spend considerable time and effort. With regard to the blog competition the instructor noted a lack of participation (i.e., infrequent blog posts) even though the requirements (i.e., minimum number of blog posts) were stated in the syllabus. Some students commented on this behavior at the end of the semester, for example: "Require

stricter regulations on when to blog. Some groups lacked enough blogs”; Make sure that everybody HAS to blog something every week, thereby forcing them to participate”; “Require students to construct a schedule for blog posts”. As a result of the lack of individual blog posts the instructor also experienced difficulties in assigning the individual grade. As Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol (2010) rightfully conclude, the lack of dedication can lead to a complete failure of the project. Thus, it is critical to increase and/or maintain student motivations in the blog project. One important task for the instructor is to read and review blog posts continuously and leave comments and/or questions that would engage students further in critical thinking and communication (e.g. Kaplan, Piskin, & Bol, 2010).

### **Written Rubrics for Assessment**

As described earlier the grading was based on several factors. However, no written rubrics were used. For future applications, grading rubrics would appear to be an essential guide (Kaplan et al. 2010). This can be used to communicate expectations more clearly to students at the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, future research may want to compare the effectiveness of this project by comparing students’ analytical and communication skills, e.g. in longitudinal studies or across sections (i.e. one section using the blog competition versus one without). We did not control for final grades, thus we cannot tell objectively how performance may have varied.

### **Variations of the Project**

This project was based on individual and team performance. Kaplan et al. (2010) discussed blog teams and a weekly competition as a possible variation of their project. One student in class suggested conducting the blog competition as a single assignment because it was difficult to coordinate with team members. This is a valid complaint; however, collaboration is a critical skill in the business environment. Some students this year also made interesting suggestions. For instance, variations may include sponsored blogs by businesses or project competition with other schools.

Both variants while quite thought-provoking may add new challenges such as finding potential partner institutions with similar class settings, harmonizing assessment and grading criteria, recruiting open-minded businesses, dealing with client restrictions of blog topics and content.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, students seemed to have enjoyed this real-life project and have gained important learning outcomes of reflective and analytical thinking, written and oral communication, self-directed learning, teamwork dynamics, and the use of cutting-edge technology. In both semesters, a vast majority agreed or completely agreed that they improved their skills of using web technologies throughout the project, and that the project increased

their attention to the course in general. Most students further agreed or completely agreed that, as a learning experience, the project was more productive than listening to a lecture. In summary, this project demonstrates how marketing blogging can be integrated with web analytics as an innovative pedagogical tool to build and enhance students' soft skills and hard skills for real-world business scenarios in the context of online marketing.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Comparison of student teams' blog performance**

<i>Blog Team</i>	<i>Blog 1</i>	<i>Blog 2</i>	<i>Blog 3</i>	<i>Blog 4</i>	<i>Blog 5</i>	<i>Blog 6</i>	<i>Blog 7</i>	<i>Blog 8</i>
<b>Blog Name</b>	<b>Public Propaganda</b>	<b>Mobile Mkt and Tech.</b>	<b>Dream Team Analytics</b>	<b>Surviving Social Media Jungle</b>	<b>CHEERS!</b>	<b>Soft Drinks and Beauty Products</b>	<b>Selling Point: Commercial Explorers</b>	<b>They shoot, They score</b>
<b>Blogger Stats</b>	13	10	9	11	9	9	8	8
Number of followers	1395	433	477	2,142	764	555	430	259
Total pageviews	598	138	187	1,253	423	192	164	22
Highest number of pageviews in a month	96	21	25	265	113	19	63	22
Highest pageviews per blog topic	302	1	63	17	217	13	59	60
Referrals from Facebook	58	32	29	627	18	47	45	59
Referrals from Google.com								
<b>Google Analytics Stats</b>	648	219	290	1,119	166	123	318	189
Visits since beginning	1,339	508	689	1,527	481	537	713	525
Total pageviews	250	56	64	749	95	42	118	86
Unique visitors	03:15	03:00	04:07	01:04	01:57	06:12	05:16	02:58
Avg time on site	63%	65%	60%	68%	51%	21%	65%	69%
Bounce rate	37%	25%	22%	67%	57%	34%	37%	44%
Loyalty: 1 times (%)	6%	11%	1%	5%	0%	2%	6%	8%
Traffic search engines	75%	66%	96%	78%	93%	87%	87%	69%
Traffic referring sites	37 visits via 26 keywords	25 visits via 11 keywords	4 visits via 6 keywords	59 visits via 23 keywords	0 visits	3 visits via 3 keywords	21 visits via 10 keywords	15 visits via 10 keywords

