

Media and Marketing: An Interdisciplinary Pilot Project

What do Communications, Media, and Studio Arts students have in common with Commerce students? They share more interests and knowledge than you might think. In an interdisciplinary course piloted for the first time in the Winter 2018 semester, both groups of students showed that they were keen to deconstruct how “commodity fetishism” is conveyed in advertising, but that was just the beginning. A shared interest in interdisciplinary experiential education and e-learning practices is what led then-coordinator of Commerce and current coordinator of Pedagogical Support and Innovation, Elana

Cooperberg, and me to develop a project that would bring together the students in two of our respective courses: *Marketing* and *Visual Literacy and Culture (VLC)*. Our primary goals were to enrich the student experience by engaging them in deep learning across disciplines and to create authentic learning situations wherein students could share the disciplinary expertise they are developing in their programs. As such, on six occasions throughout the semester, 67 students came together to deconstruct the role that commodity fetishism plays in television commercials through a process of teaching and learning from one another.

The idea of commodity fetishism originates in Marxist theory; it is a conceptual process whereby “mass-produced goods are emptied of the meaning of their production (the context in which they were produced, such as a factory and the labor that created them) and then filled with new meanings in ways that both mystifies the product and turns it into a fetish object” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). For the VLC student, learning how an advertisement achieves this through semiotics and aesthetically-based, creative attributes are key to media literacy. For the Marketing student, understanding the marketing concept and its relationship to consumption and consumer behaviour helps to define personal choice and identifies branding decisions.

The structure of this recent pilot project stems from a written research assignment that I assigned in my previous *VLC* courses. For the assessment, each student had been asked to find a television commercial for a product that they enjoyed. They were then required to research the creative marketing strategies of the company that produced the ad, and finally, they were asked to deconstruct the semiotics at play in creating a commodity fetish for the product. The methodology for the pilot course, by comparison, was to break down the required deliverables of the former essay into *segments* that would be discussed by our merged student population over the course of the semester. The goal of this multi-staged process was to help foster in the students a deeper understanding of the required terminology and concepts in their respective disciplines and, in turn, allow them to teach each other about their respective disciplines. Also, at the core of this project were the cultivation of inter-personal growth through interdisciplinary learning and the development of insight into how our two disciplines work together in the “real world.” After all, an advertising agency needs the expertise of creative professionals as well as marketing professionals to sell their products. Elana and I hoped that the learning situations we designed would offer an authentic window into professions that our students may be inspired to pursue.

For our first merged meeting in February, we assembled in a theatre space and teamed up the students into groups of four to six



Photo credit Brandon Calder

individuals. As an icebreaker and a means to introduce them all to “brand culture” and the foundations of commodity fetishism, each student came to class with a printed “starter-pack” that was meant to represent aspects of their own identity. Starter-packs are online memes, typically made up of four or more products and/or objects that represent a persona. To our surprise, very few of our students knew what a starter-pack was, despite the phenomenon being known as a very popular social media pastime among young adults. Our hope for this first assignment was that group members would find common ground within their personal collections of lifestyle/commodity interests, and from there, determine the product or brand that would be the focus of their group project on how a commodity fetish is created.

Once the teams’ products were established, the subsequent objective was for groups to decide on two television ads for the same product — one that was produced for their chosen product in recent years, and another that is older than ten years. The objective here was to help students to contextualize each ad by identifying evolutionary changes over time (e.g. intended audience and aesthetic differences).

As an e-learning environment for the students to produce and assemble their individual and team assignments, we incorporated a relatively new web application called Padlet into the design of our pilot project. The application was chosen for its usability, ease of digital content upload, and its attractive templates which promised to offer lots of room for individual expression.

With each assignment and meeting, the teams’ Padlet spaces began to flourish. Students were deconstructing the semiotics inherent in their respective ads and assembling researched sources to support their observations as well as their understanding of and ideas about the company they had selected. The learning outcome of these sessions was distinct; as team members compared their observations and findings, new vocabulary and deeper insights into the assignment objectives emerged.

By May, the interdisciplinary teams assembled conclusions for the work they had achieved throughout the term on a “Team Padlet” page, and they delivered their findings in the form of a team presentation. With only ten minutes allotted per team, groups were

required to effectively manage their time, balance their delivery of information, describe connections between the content of students’ respective courses, and demonstrate the most impactful learnings that they had each gleaned from their work together.

At the core of this project were the cultivation of inter-personal growth through interdisciplinary learning and the development of insight into how our two disciplines work together in the “real world.”

The intention behind spreading the student-led group meetings over six sessions throughout the winter semester was multi-faceted. We reasoned that as students encountered new content in their respective courses throughout the semester, opportunities to teach the material to one another along the way would reinforce their understanding, thus providing rich opportunities for effective integration of learning — especially since their discussions were centered on one focused question that remained consistent throughout the project: how is commodity fetishism achieved?

The learning outcomes we envisaged for our students while designing the project included the development of a deeper understanding of the concepts presented in their own discipline, greater understanding of the vocabulary and thinking processes of another discipline (cross-disciplinary insight), familiarization with web-literacy practices, and peer-to-peer communication and collaboration. Appreciation for the fact that skills from various disciplines are required in “real life” professional contexts such as advertising was one of the values that Elana and I aimed for in the early stages of this project’s development. Providing our students with opportunities to break through the siloes of program disciplines may not be a steadfast means of improving students’ grades, but creating a context for deeper learning was, and remains, our most highly-valued objective.



Colleen Ayoup
is a teacher in the Communications,
Media and Studio Arts program.

Reference

Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2018). Practices of looking: an introduction to visual culture (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.