

Knacktive: Answering a Call for More Interdisciplinary, Collaborative, Educational Experiences

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Knacktive is a one-term course that incorporates a highly select group of undergraduate students and replicates the intense teamwork atmosphere of a technology-oriented, professional marketing communication agency. As an interdisciplinary learning opportunity, Knacktive melds students from five disciplines—including art and graphic design, interactive digital media and computer science, public relations, journalism and media studies, and marketing and business management—into an interactive, team-based course facilitated by five faculty members representing the disciplines. Although other college-level student agencies exist, many are staffed by students from only one discipline.

Utilizing active research methodology, faculty reflections resulted in course changes that significantly improved course functionality. Student achievements included client implementation of many of the student team-developed concepts and promotional materials.

Student reflections collectively viewed the agency-like process as a “brutal” but rewarding experience. The students also noted that the experience helped develop more professional attitudes about meetings, deadlines, interpersonal communications, collegiality, teamwork, and problem solving skills.

Keywords: collaboration, marketing communication, pedagogy, technology

In the spring of 2010, one regional state university’s administration and faculty were challenged by a 1960 alumnus to address what he perceived as a need for more integrated, interdisciplinary, and hands-on educational experiences for students heading into business, marketing, advertising, and related fields. His appeal was based on thirty years in the advertising business and discussions with industry leaders. Their collective desire was to find entry-level employees with higher levels of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, combined with an expanded interdisciplinary understanding.

In addition to his challenge, the alum offered the assistance of an employee who developed a course addressing similar issues at another institution. Five faculty members volunteered to work with the alumnus’ Executive on Loan (EoL)

and investigate a “first-order change” (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, 94) in the form of an elective, multi-disciplinary class that could offer significant instructional and collaborative opportunities.

The five faculty worked together to develop an interdisciplinary course to address the skills currently lacking in college graduates. The course, later named Knacktive, incorporated a competitive, team-based structure to address a real world client’s problem, essentially meeting Lewin’s requisite of challenging the status quo through participative re-education (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985).

For the first year, curriculum was quickly established and implemented in near record time for such a collaborative and interdisciplinary effort. It was only when the first Knacktive students received interviews for heretofore-unattainable internships and job interviews that the faculty fully realized just how special and effective the Knacktive experience was for the students. Each of the Knacktive faculty was already focused on creating an educational experience that better prepared students for a more competitive entry into the

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professional world. Consequently, studying and sharing the Knacktive experience and its potential suddenly became a serious consideration. The faculty embraced Zeichner's (2001) concept of action research, where faculty "inquire into their own practice as teachers" (274). The approach also meets Lippitt's (as cited in Coghlan and Brannick 2005) definition as the most authentic form of action research, where a direct collaboration exists between the researcher and the researched.

In order to improve the course for future terms, the faculty employed action research to investigate and present an improved pedagogy surrounding hands-on, practicum experiences (Cole 1995). This paper presents a model of collaborative interdisciplinary cooperation where faculty determined the course structure and supervised the educational process, a client from outside the university provided the opportunity/challenge, and student-led teams "share the power of knowledge production . . . [all of which] . . . subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policy-makers" (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, 7). Concurrently, Lewin's action research imperative, including iterative cycles of problem identification, development, implementation and assessment, are integral to the Knacktive course experience (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985).

What is Knacktive?

Knacktive is a one-term course composed of a highly select group of undergraduate students that replicates the intense teamwork atmosphere of a technology-oriented, professional marketing communication agency. Initially, 24 students were selected through an interview process from five disciplines: Art, Communication, Computer Science/Information Systems, Marketing and Management, and Mass Communication. Today the course encompasses thirty-two students from six disciplines and five faculty members from two colleges at the university. Students from English were added in 2012. During the pilot trimester, the first assignment was to select a course/agency name. After much deliberation the students settled on Knacktive. As the students explained, everyone brings a set of skills, personality, experience, and knowledge to the course, to their team, and to their work—their own personal "knack."

One of the initial issues, behind the creation of Knacktive, was the lack of interdisciplinary exposure by students. It is very common for students to be "siloes" during their educational career, working only with other students in their field. After consulting with industry leaders, it was determined that interdisciplinary learning experiences are essential for students to be properly equipped for the professional working world.

According to Winitsky and colleagues (1995), teamwork and professional interaction are greatly enhanced when students develop an awareness and comprehension of other

fields and subjects. Many of the university's students complete internships, but very few have the opportunity to interact with all of the competencies in a single working experience as the proposed experience could offer. As an example of this deficiency, students traditionally spend extensive time within their chosen discipline, and as a result, they develop highly focused communication skills allowing them to converse effectively with students in similar fields of study, but not so efficiently with students in dissimilar fields (Holtzman, Dukes, and Page 2012).

This educational partitioning creates an unnecessary and sometimes counterproductive situation for the student when they enter the professional work environment. Cross-disciplinary communication can present challenges, as students do not necessarily share a mutual lexicon of appropriate or complimentary terminology, even on similar topics. This can lead to miscommunication and reduced operational efficiencies as individuals attempt to learn new or different meanings, descriptions, and processes.

For the students, the course incorporates direct client interaction, real-world research challenges, cross-discipline collaboration, inter-team competition, intense creative demands, and the opportunity to utilize their individual academic and personal strengths – a true amalgam that embraces Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) "knowledge in action" (7) conceptual approach.

Interestingly, each of the faculty possessed decades of professional and consulting experience outside the academy. The Knacktive faculty are living Holtzman, Dukes, and Page's (2012) postulation that "knowledge of how the professional roles, expectations and standards are similar and unique across disciplines can help . . . programs formulate classes and support field experiences that utilize interdisciplinary collaboration" (89). Their personal experiences sensitized the faculty members to the necessity for interdisciplinary collaboration and higher levels of teamwork, which have become the hallmark of the Knacktive experience.

Each of the Knacktive faculty members also instruct advanced courses in their respective disciplines: computer science, graphic design, journalism, public relations, and marketing research. Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) concept of "knowledge in action" is the essential focus for each of the Knacktive faculty.

During the Knacktive experience, student-led teams conduct market research, analyze data, write creative strategies, and ultimately develop an integrated, digital, marketing communication campaign and promotional materials for a "real-world" client. Each faculty member combines discipline knowledge with direct professional experience. They consult with the student teams who fashion a competitive solution to the client's authentic, tangible, market-driven situation. At the end of the term, each team makes a formal presentation, or client pitch, in an attempt to convince the client that their campaign plan provides the best promotional solutions. These steps are nearly identical to the procedure followed

by marketing and advertising agencies when they compete for clients. The process is firmly rooted in Elden and Levin's (1991) co-generative approach to knowledge construction that "merges professional knowledge in a process of collaborative sensemaking [sic]" (Levin and Greenwood 2001, 105).

Knacktive is also highly unusual, if not unique, among comparable, collegiate-based, student agencies because of the participation by technology majors, such as Interactive Digital Media, Computer Sciences, and Management Information Systems. One highlighted program, launched in 2001, is Interactive Digital Media (IDM), where students combine the areas of computer science, art, and mass communication. The IDM program is Knacktive's source for students with specific skills at incorporating promotional concepts to social media, website, and mobile applications. Several of the Knacktive faculty are also involved in the IDM program.

Course Development

At the beginning of this venture, the university offered no course with the significant level of interdisciplinary interaction students would encounter as they entered the workforce. The faculty volunteers resolved that a course comprised of students from multiple disciplines, focused on solving an actual client's marketing communication problem, could offer an exceptional educational and professional preparatory experience. The core concept was to duplicate as closely as possible the functions of a professional marketing communication agency where cross-discipline interaction is a daily occurrence.

Over the summer and fall of 2010, the faculty members met bi-weekly, established an aggressive start date of January 2011 and began developing plans for the course.

Several factors also coalesced to severely restrict the class scheduling options: the university's spring academic calendar was already published, and teaching assignments were finalized, plus the EoL lived three hours away. Consequently, the only option was to schedule a single, three-hour, class session on Friday afternoons during the spring trimester.

Mid-October saw participating faculty promoting the new course to their seniors and high-performing juniors. Students had to complete an online application form and then interviews were scheduled with the faculty members, for each of the eight positions. The student positions mirrored roles on a professional marketing communications agency team: project manager, art director, copywriter, graphic designer, interactive/digital manager, media manager, public relations manager, and research manager.

The faculty realized a need for students to develop an awareness of, and an appreciation for, the skills and knowledge residing in their new teammates. This led to the development of multiple exercises, discussions, and new summary lectures to quickly orient the students to the wealth of resources encompassed within each team.

Because of their professional backgrounds, the participating faculty also recognized the additional benefits possible with this type of course: improved portfolio materials, expanded teamwork and problem-solving experiences, enhanced interpersonal communication proficiency, and a deeper understanding of the creative process, all in a challenging professionally styled working experience.

METHOD

The Knacktive experience fully embraces Levin and Greenwood's (2001) admonition that "action research focuses on solving context-bound, real-life problems" (105). Through this action research methodology, starting the first term and continuing to the present time, assessment of the process is continuously being completed. The faculty work as a team throughout the year to address areas of concern and attempt to exploit positive outcomes of the course.

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) posit three key concepts for appropriate action research: particularity, situationality and being out of praxis. Reflecting on these concepts, the Knacktive experience was quite "particular" in its specificity of students by discipline, the disciplines of participating faculty, and the diversity of participating academic disciplines; "situational" in class scheduling, client selection, and the inclusion of IDM students; and purposefully "out of praxis" in the design and implementation of the course as an intensely collaborative and interdisciplinary experience (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, 7).

At mid-trimester and again at the end of the course, students were given a survey covering the course and all course-related experiences. The student survey responses were anonymous. As suggested in literature, the faculty also reflected on the year-long experience, the outcomes, and what it all meant for any future attempt to offer the course again (Kolb 1984; Seibert and Daudelin 1999; Raelin 2000; Rudolph, Taylor and Foldy 2001; McGill and Brockbank 2004). The faculty's self-reflection was a key step in the "conscious and deliberate enactment of the action research cycle" (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, 7). As Corey (1953) originally postulated and Noffke (1997) reinforced, the Knacktive faculty felt they could improve the experience for the students if they reviewed their experiences and used that knowledge to make curricular adjustments in each subsequent year. Consequently, each term, the students are asked what components of the course should be maintained and what could be changed to improve the experience for future students.

Tomal (2003) summarized the action research process in education as "a systematic process in solving educational problems and making improvements . . . [including] appropriate interventions to collect and analyze data and then to implement actions to address educational issues" (8). After each year's experience, students completed a survey

covering the course experience, team functioning, a peer evaluation, and reflections for future improvements. Each year, the Knacktive faculty also reflected on the experience in two ways: (1) through a weekly meeting where each course activity was reviewed to determine what could be improved for the next year or if any additional programming should be incorporated for the current year, and (2) by writing down and sharing their personal reactions and thoughts about the entire course processes and results. During the summer, the faculty reviewed the student feedback, along with their own collective reflections and began working on improvements for the following year. Reviewing the student responses, the team performances and the faculty reflections resulted in an extensive list of observations and potential course improvements each year.

RESULTS

Year One

As the faculty reviewed the team's campaigns, the student's work products, and reflected on the course outcomes, they were struck by several factors, including the professional level of the creative work, student attainment of extremely competitive internships and job interviews, along with the obvious need for significant course revisions. The work product each team and student now possessed for their professional portfolios was vastly superior to anything produced in other individual courses or internships in any of the participating disciplines. In year one, the winning team produced such impressive creative solutions that the client immediately instructed their agency to implement many of the proposed tactics, advertisements, and promotional materials across the country, with only minor revisions. In addition, several students parlayed their Knacktive experience into internships at two of the region's most competitive and prestigious advertising/marketing agencies.

Challenges: Year one

Several course organization concerns surfaced as faculty and student reflections were analyzed. Working in teams on such an intense and complex project was new territory for nearly every student. While the teams had coalesced as working units, developing an identity and camaraderie on their way to solving a real-world problem, there were significant communication and teamwork issues that the loaned executive sought to address, albeit from a distance. In an effort to monitor course progress, the faculty planned to administer two surveys during the trimester. Both the mid-course and the end-of-course surveys indicated that the EoL's distance from campus and subsequent lack of accessibility was not productively addressed by phone calls, Skype, or e-mails.

Inextricably linked with the EoL's communication challenges was the three-hour-long, one-day-per-week class schedule.

Adjustments: Year one

By mid-term, the campus-based faculty had instituted weekly telephone conferences with the EoL and posted as much information as possible on the course website. The campus-based faculty also held meetings with students as the course progressed. Ultimately, the end-of-course student surveys expressed a desire for even more written explanations, along with easier access to faculty consultation, feedback, and advice.

A three-hour class allowed for wide-ranging discussions and ample time for complex presentations, but the student's lack of experience with intensive, team-based assignments often left them confused and struggling during the intervening days. In addition, finding time for team meetings and faculty feedback outside of class was problematic. In spite of the challenges, the university administration, the faculty, and the client viewed the pilot course as an unqualified success.

Year Two

As Schein (1999) explains, participants need to reflect on their individual and group communication and team-based experiences to evolve effective resolutions and responses. The campus-based faculty spent the summer of 2011 meeting bi-weekly and visiting agencies in Kansas City and Cincinnati. They shifted to weekly meetings when the fall trimester commenced; revising course assignments, activities, lectures, guest speakers, and lesson plans. The EoL moved to a consultant/lecturer role. The class was scheduled to meet four days a week in the spring 2012 term. In contrast to the first year's week-by-week disclosure approach, the second year lesson plans were very Apollonian—cycles of work directed by the faculty's lectures and meetings with the team in a very rational, linear, and systematic approach (Heron 1996).

Wheelan (1999) also proposed reflecting on previous experiences, which ultimately allowed the faculty to develop different approaches with the course. A new feature for Knacktive's second year was separate meeting rooms for the student teams, during the last half of the course. This provided a space for each team to meet and privately conduct their competitive campaign plan discussions while the faculty rotated between the rooms. Faculty held meetings as a group with each team, or individual faculty members would meet with a team to address specific questions. Faculty reflections also identified student needs in cross-discipline and subject matter understanding.

Throughout the spring 2012 trimester, faculty presented lectures on topics critical to the students developing a better understanding of specific topics, including conducting primary research, writing strategies and tactics, creative

development, and media planning across multiple channels. The purpose of these lectures was to provide a common base of information and understanding for students from the other majors who were not required to take these specific courses or subjects. In addition, executives from professional marketing agencies visited the class, gave formal presentations, and met with the student teams to review their work.

Another feature of the expanded class meetings was the inclusion of two full weeks to rehearse the client presentations, receive faculty feedback, and make any necessary adjustments before the formal client pitch.

Challenges: Year two

The faculty discovered an interpersonal issue within one team near the end of the trimester, which nearly derailed the team's entire campaign and final presentation. Direct faculty intervention identified and addressed the interpersonal problems, allowing time to recover and finish assembling a solid, professional-level client pitch. The mid-course student reflections did not uncover any of the eventual course problems.

Student reflections at the end of the second year generally viewed the agency-like process as a "brutal" but rewarding experience. The students noted the experience helped them develop more professional attitudes about meetings, deadlines, interpersonal communication, collegiality, teamwork and problem solving skills. The students also identified several areas where they felt a need for more input and information: project management oversight, problem-solving in a team environment, and additional information about the various steps of the campaign planning process. Concurrently, the faculty felt the student project managers were extremely uneven in their understanding of their roles and in the management of their respective teams.

Results: Year two

In year two, the student work was once again strong enough for the client to instruct his marketing staff to directly incorporate several elements into the organization's current marketing efforts. As the 2012 summer session began, several Knacktive students were able to earn very competitive internships and post-graduation jobs with a growing number of top Kansas City and Omaha agencies and corporations. The experience appeared uniquely beneficial for Knacktive alumni.

Year Three

To plan for year three, the Knacktive faculty duplicated the previous years' summer and fall meeting schedules. A new feature during the summer was trips by the Knacktive faculty to four major advertising/marketing agencies in three cities: Cincinnati, Kansas City, and Omaha. Northwest and Knacktive alumni are now employed at each of the agencies being

visited. The agency executives provided extensive advice to the faculty about current market conditions, their desires regarding new employees and ideas for making the Knacktive experience even more valuable to the students.

The first major change for year three concerned the project managers, their need for additional oversight, and the faculty's concern over the previous years' uneven performance. Two additional changes were also planned: scheduling a weekly meeting between the faculty and each team's project manager; and the implementation of a weekly, written, project status report from each team. The faculty reviewed the student submissions relating to their personal academic discipline and provided feedback through the appropriate project manager. The third year class schedule also included more sessions with agency professionals, something the students valued highly and the faculty observed had positively impacted their work. The proposed schedule changes included opportunities for agency professionals to visit separately with each team and provide feedback about the team's in-progress campaign plans.

Challenges: Year three

Many of the process and operational challenges of the previous two years were noticeably absent from the teams during Knacktive's third year. Weekly meetings provided detailed insight for the faculty into each team's functionality. Internal team communications also appeared to improve, possibly as a result of the individual accountability, again driven by the weekly project manager's report.

The mid-course student surveys confirmed the project manager's concerns of inadequate participation by copywriters on three of the four teams, resulting in individual meetings between the under-performing students and their supervising faculty member.

Results: Year three

The year three client took implementation of student suggestions to a new level: purchasing new website URL addresses during the breaks between the final team presentations, using his smart phone. He also created two social media internships the following week and began plans to change the business logo to one designed by the winning team.

CONCLUSION

The process of course facilitation is challenging in the best of circumstances. With thirty-two students separated into four competitive teams advised by five instructors, the process is somewhat convoluted and periodically confusing. Concurrently, action research cycles combine with systems thinking in a very complementary fashion to facilitate the Knacktive faculty's efforts. "In a systems approach to action research, tentative explanations are being formed as the story unfolds.

These explanations are tentative frames to articulate the elements of the system in order that they may be understood and to consider interventions to change them, where required” (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, 100). The mid-course and end-of-course student surveys, combined with corresponding faculty reflections and agency professional’s post-team meeting reactions provides a rich and insightful pool of data for course management and academic improvements. Mirroring Senge’s (1990) view, the Knacktive faculty have repeatedly worked to recognize patterns in student interactions, to draw analogies from their professional experiences, and to implement creative solutions to the evolving course challenges.

Concurrently, the Knacktive experience correlates to a marketing communication agency work environment and provides valuable instructional opportunities for learning. The Knacktive faculty also realize what a number of scholars contend, namely that complete and functional consistency is not only unrealistic, but the existence of paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions within a process are more likely to lead to greater long-term success (e.g. Lewis 2000; Murnighan and Conlon 1991, Quinn and Cameron 1988; Seo, Putnam, and Bartunek 2004; Smith and Berg 1987; Van de Ven and Poole 1988). As a result, the Knacktive experience provides students with a robust and intense understanding of the various roles and how they coordinate within the professional work setting.

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) state, “The desired outcomes of the action research approach are not just solutions to the immediate problems but are important learning from outcomes both intended and unintended, and a contribution to scientific knowledge and theory” (4). The Knacktive faculty sincerely desire to provide touch points for colleagues to utilize in their own context. More advanced undergraduate coursework should embrace interdisciplinary and collaborative concepts in an effort to more effectively prepare students for their career fields. The Knacktive faculty considers cross-disciplinary work an important teaching methodology and critical to the preparation of college students as it closely replicates the post-graduation workplace.

The support and participation that Knacktive enjoys from professional marketing communication agencies and its executives make this an exceptional experience for both students and faculty. Knacktive provides students with a real-world, professional-level, team environment with real deadline pressures in a realistic work atmosphere with less of an academically segregated view of the marketplace. Moreover, having IDM majors on the Knacktive teams is a unique factor among college-level agency experiences, making the experience directly applicable to today’s electronically enhanced workplace. As a result, the course is very attractive to prospective students and marketable to potential clients. The faculty also views the Knacktive curriculum as a dynamic process that will always need adjustments, reflecting the influence of new clients, different agency advisors, new faculty, new students, as well as the evolution of the market-

place. In this sense, Knacktive is truly advancing Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) action research alternative of appreciative inquiry, building on successful experiences for future improvement rather than focusing on negative issues.

The university’s administration is pleased with Knacktive and has committed continued support. Knacktive has provided public relations exposure for the institution, with several external groups referencing the Knacktive project at statewide and regional meetings. In addition, the success of Knacktive gives university recruiters a differentiating experience to share. It is also encouraging to note that the academic departments view participation in Knacktive as a positive contribution to a faculty member’s promotion portfolio and tenure process. Another extremely positive development at the university is the recent incorporation of a paragraph supporting interdisciplinary activities into the institutional mission statement. This action brings to fruition a pattern of interaction between the participating departments and formalizes the mutual influence on each other within the educational process (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

The Knacktive faculty’s experience has proven incredibly proactive, reflective, critical, committed, independent, collaborative, aspirational, and realistic—all working characteristics Friedman (2001) claims are essential for effective organizational learning. Fortuitously, the Knacktive faculty possesses a complementary set of knowledge, experiences, and professional skills. They often challenge each other to view the agency process and the student interactions from a perspective outside of their respective academic discipline. In addition, the faculty worked extremely well together throughout the revision, planning, and implementation of this unique educational experience.

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