

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN A STUDENT-RUN STARTUP:
A CASE STUDY OF A
UNIVERSITY STUDENT-LED COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY

by

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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Jacht Ad Lab is a curious educational hybrid, which marries a credit-bearing college class with a startup business. This hands-on university-level experience is now in its sixth year of operation. A student-run revenue-generating communications agency, Jacht has become an important experiential education component within the advertising and public relations curriculum in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), a large Midwest land grant institution of higher education.

Student-led communications agencies are increasingly being added to programs in advertising, public relations and marketing communications (Haley et al., 2016). However, little research has been conducted on the phenomenon. A survey of agencies in accredited advertising programs hinted at the diversity of structures and resources, as well as the difficulty in tracking the creation and extinction of such efforts (Busch, 2013).

A high level of interest in Jacht, from current and prospective students and their parents, university administrators, prospective employers, donors, and other institutions suggests that the program could be an interesting case to document.

In addition, Jacht can be seen in a bigger picture of higher education research, both as an opportunity for an educator/researcher to reflect on practice, and as a springboard for

broader issues around the role of career education at universities, the challenges of bringing innovative curriculum to realization, and the value of experiential education.

The purpose of this research is to provide a case study describing the creation and evolution of Jacht Ad Lab, as seen through the eyes of the founder/researcher, and incorporating the perspective of co-teachers as well as over 70 past student participants. Such a detailed history and analysis of this particular case will add to the growing body of literature concerning experiential education for college students, in particular those pursuing degrees in advertising, public relations, marketing, graphic design, or communications.

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to the five most important people in my life.

First, to my mom, Velma Dowding Struthers, who asked me more times than I can count if I was working on my Ph.D. and writing my dissertation. My hope has been to complete this work in time for her to attend my graduation and at 95 years old, to sit in the front row at my hooding.

Second, I dedicate this dissertation to my dad, Russell M. Struthers, who was a man of the highest integrity. His quiet service to his family and his community, and his commitment to doing the right thing, continues to inspire me decades after his death.

Next, to my sons Russell Struthers Troxel and Nicholas Struthers Troxel, who spent many evenings home alone through the decade that I worked to complete a Ph.D. and who provided me with constant encouragement. I hope to have inspired them to just keep at it, whatever *it* is.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Charlie Troxel, the most incredible cheerleader, most fun and smart life partner, and most loving spouse, whose belief in me has never flagged.

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I also owe a heartfelt thank you to committee member Melissa Homestead, who saw the research potential at Jacht and more importantly, never lost confidence in me, always prodding me to move forward. She is my role model as a scholar and has become a dear friend.

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While in New York, I enjoyed the friendship and constant encouragement of Rosemary Abendroth, who merits recognition as someone key in the completion of this work. Walks in Central Park and long conversations over good food with this important friend nourished me, body and soul.

I also wish to thank my amazing Jacht co-teachers, professionals of the highest caliber: Greg Bousquet, Sandra Day Cranny, Ryan Holt, Charles A. Piper, and Brian Reid. Their dual roles as practitioners and educators enriched the Jacht environment beyond measure.

Above all, I thank the students of Jacht Ad Lab for their participation in this effort. They are an inspiration to me beyond words.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Through my eyes

The windowless basement room is dark as I unlock the door to enter. Just a few years ago, I remember, this space was just one more area in an old dilapidated building, unoccupied and, frankly, scary. I flashback to a walkthrough not long ago, when it was first proposed that this be Jacht's new home, our sixth move in four years. I flip the first set of lights on, and the room is transformed. A long stylish gold couch stretches between matching chairs and a coffee table to create a welcoming first stop in the agency. The agency mascot, Seymour the stuffed giraffe, sits in a corner of the couch. He is a reminder of a student-created campaign to promote Jacht as a class choice by juxtaposing things that aren't real with things that are. I am mindful of the fact that miniature giraffes aren't real, but the experience I've promised students at Jacht is real: real work for real clients with real deadlines and real money.

As the second set of lights pop on, rows of new black Ikea worktables appear, with padded brown chairs around their edges. New computers sit on the tables around the periphery. The center tables are pushed together in one large open workspace. I take in the décor, modern and fresh and colorful. The walls are parts of an old trade show booth for the brand Nautica Jeans; the pieces help to divide the room into distinct spaces: a conference room, an "ideation nook," an editing bay. As I continue to open doors and turn on lights, I make sure there is fresh water in the two coffee makers, that coffee and hot chocolate are set out, and that clean mugs are available. All is silent and tidy.

But only for a moment. Soon the first of the 25 current Jacht students begin to enter. It is 1:30 on a Wednesday, and our student-run communications agency is open for business.

Through the students' eyes

Savannah: "When I walk into Jacht I truly feel like a young professional. I feel like I'm doing something for a grander purpose than fulfilling a credit for my capstone class.

Rather, it's an environment where I am fostering relationships with my peers, experts in the advertising world and those within the Journalism College. It's an environment where the confidence I have in myself can grow exponentially and where I can learn tangible "real-life" skills - from simply learning how to work with a variety of people with different skill sets, to writing a contract and getting it approved. It's the epitome of what every professor has encouraged me to do: Get real life experience, make connections, challenge yourself."

Jack: "I wish I had a better time at Jacht. . .It could've been a great experience for everybody, but there just wasn't enough work to go around. Instead it became a time to just hang out with other students that somewhat were sharing the same struggle as you, but having a good time making friends with people that shared the same passion for advertising."

Emma: "Walking into Jacht I always find myself thinking two things: First, 'wow it's so cute in here,' and second, 'how lucky am I to be able to spend my afternoon with this group of passionate people?!' While my roommate is throwing on her Nike sweatpants and heading out to Oldfather for math, I get to button up my cardigan and

prepare for my client meeting. Jacht is such a unique opportunity, one of the reasons I transferred here from KU actually, and every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I'm reminded of how blessed we are to be in this selected group!"

Introduction to the Case

Jacht Ad Lab is a learn-through-authentic-practice hybrid of a class and a startup business in its sixth year of operation in Lincoln Nebraska, and as such it is also a hybrid of the ancient trade practice of apprenticeship and the much more recent one of professional university preparation. The case of its creation and initial development thus offers an important vantage point to consider alternative (and perhaps ancient) modalities for higher education and fit within the literature on professional education, or what the American Education Research Association encapsulates in its Division I – Education in the Professions. Some education scholars have noted that experiential education is “experience rich but theory poor” (Breunig, 2005, p.107). For this study, I will draw from Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), proposed by David Kolb (1984), as well as elements of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1998), to provide a theoretical foundation for my analysis. ELT is a constructivist theory of learning that places emphasis on the concept that “social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Kolb positions learning as a process rather than as an outcome, a process that allows learners to examine, test and integrate their own ideas with new ideas through interactions with the environment. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) frames as learning as “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (Lave and Wenger, 1998). Understood as

a whole, LPP indicates membership in a community. The concept goes beyond the limited idea of learning as merely situated in practice, by indicating the rich interactions in a social web that are involved in an experience like Jacht. The phenomenon is more about learning than about observable teaching, as a “community of practice” creates a sort of “curriculum” that is realized in opportunities for engagement in practice. Eckert (2006) defines communities of practice as:

a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor. Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members’ participation in, and orientation to, the world around them. It provides an accountable link, therefore, between the individual, the group, and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice emerges as a function of this link.

The concept of community is fundamental to legitimate peripheral participation, with a community of practice defined as “a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1998, p. 98).

The community of practice that is Jacht is a working ad agency filled with almost entirely new employees every four months, where students pay tuition to come to work and earn college credit. As with any class, that tuition filters only indirectly back to Jacht. This student-run revenue-generating advertising agency has, in its short run so far, become a significant part of the advertising and public relations curriculum in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), a large Midwest land grant institution of higher education. The intended outcome of Jacht is to better prepare college graduates for rapid employment in the advertising and public relations industries upon completion of their degree programs. To accomplish this goal,

students are immersed in a real-world environment at Jacht, with real clients, real budgets, real deadlines, real expenses, and real pressures. More than 200 students, both undergraduate and graduate, have enrolled in Jacht since its inception in the fall of 2010.

The agency quickly drew attention from across the university. The annual report produced by UNL's Office of Research & Economic Development highlighted Jacht as the feature story from the College of Journalism and Mass Communications for the 2010-2011 publication after only a few months of operation (Student Ad Agency Sets Sail, 2011). Jacht has since evolved into what the college positions as one of the "hands-on" opportunities available to students "besides what you learn in classes" (Hands on Opportunities, 2016). Jacht is featured on the college website alongside award competitions, study abroad trips, internships and the four other for-credit courses faculty recently labeled as "experiential" for curriculum purposes (Hands on Opportunities, 2016). Donors expressed interest early in Jacht's development as well; two of the region's largest ad agencies committed funding within the first year. The agency continues to be one of the 'Featured Funds' highlighted by the University of Nebraska Foundation website (Jacht Club Ad Lab Fund, 2016).

In that time, the target disciplines of advertising and public relations, and the related media disciplines of journalism in both print and broadcast, have raced through incredible disruption and change. A recent poll by software company Adobe cited in a special report by *The Economist* found that most professionals identifying as marketers report more changes in advertising since 2012 than in the previous 50 years (Little Brother, 2014). Scholars have called for changes in the curriculum to address this, noting that "a media curriculum that emphasizes innovation and digital media entrepreneurship

is one of the keys to a robust professional future for the field and students seeking a media career” (Pavlik, 2013). Issues facing the advertising industry include those arising from the mobile and digital platforms now utilized by most audiences ; from the supply of advertising space, which has gone from a scarce resource in the days of traditional print and broadcast media to virtually unlimited space in the online environment; from new forms such as native advertising, which is content that mimics editorial content, and from new automated ways of purchasing advertising, particularly programmatic advertising (Lord, 2013). These changes in the industries we serve have left many advertising programs in higher education reeling from efforts to keep curriculum current and faculty skills updated. In an impassioned call for change, Pavlik insists that “journalism and mass communication education is in urgent need of transformative leadership. The media are in the midst of a sea-change, and educators and professionals alike are groping for a pathway to a future in which they play a vital role” (Pavlik, 2013, p. 211). In this environment, the value of developing graduates who can be “workplace ready” is critical to a program’s reputation and enrollments.

Student interest in the program has outstripped capacity and is evidenced by the number of students from all over the campus who apply for the limited positions available each term. While this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, consider how in Fall 2015 70 students applied for 20 positions. If voting with one’s feet is proof of presumed quality and/or relevance, Jacht is clearly popular to one of its core target audiences—the rising professionals that it enrolls. The experiences reported by Jacht alums in emails, social media posts and conversations suggest that students who can add involvement at the agency to their resumes are more likely to be employed in advertising,

public relations or marketing positions, and to be hired into those industries in a shorter amount of time, than those who have not been part of Jacht during their degree program (although a direct comparison of Jacht and non-Jacht students with Jacht, as the ‘treatment’ or ‘variable’ is difficult—Jacht internships are selective; so those selected have a different, more exciting candidate profile than fellow majors not selected for the program).

Administrators and faculty at UNL have expressed curiosity about the program as well as interest in growing Jacht at UNL or replicating the program in their own departments. Representatives from other institutions have reached out for information and consulting in order to start or improve their own agencies. Industry professionals both locally and nationally have come to regard the program as a talent pipeline, reaching out to Jacht when looking for new employees. Although Jacht does not keep a full inventory of job solicitations directed at Jacht’s student professionals, employer solicitations have noted that the agency serves as a talent pipeline for their industry.

Among higher education researchers on a national scale, the term “student communications agencies” has been adopted to encompass programs that focus on advertising, those focused on public relations, and those combining both disciplines, which sometimes use the labels “strategic communications” or “integrated marketing communications.” When grouped together this way, it becomes more apparent that such programs have increasingly become components in university programs during the six-year evolution of Jacht. (Haley et al., 2016) However, research on such efforts is still in its infancy. Indeed, a central logic of this dissertation depicting Jacht is to add to this literature, to provide a *portrait* (Lawrence-Lightfoot et al., 1977) of how an idea began,

became practice, grew and changed, encountered obstacles, and continues to evolve. My point is not that Jacht is an exemplar, except for that word's overlap with less value-laden cousin 'example.' The literature includes few depictions of this kind of student program/real business hybrid, and the professional education literature gets a little richer with the addition of one. The act of documenting the case also provides an opportunity to reflect on some broader questions, from the appropriateness and viability of experiential education at a university to the role of institutions of higher education in the career readiness of their undergraduate students.

A recent study of student agencies in accredited advertising programs hinted at the difficulty of finding evidence of such initiatives: with no comprehensive listing of student communications firms, those that were identified, including Jacht, were all less than five years old at the time, indicating a recent trend in adding such programs to the curriculum (Busch, 2013). Other indications that student communications agencies are increasingly being noticed include the first textbook about student communications firms is scheduled for publication in 2016, entitled "Portal to the Profession, Pillar of the Community," Dr. Doug Swanson, editor, published by Peter Lang Publishers. The book features "agency spotlights" from more than 15 faculty advisers across the country, including a profile I wrote about Jacht. This book project helped to spur more connections between advisers, who seem eager to exchange stories and discuss the viability of launching a national association of student communications agencies.

This study was conducted by the founder of Jacht Ad Lab. I am also the current program director. This involvement raises some possible pitfalls (discussed more momentarily), but it also affords a uniquely intimate perspective and depth of

engagement in the development and evolution of the program. Toma (2000) asserts that getting closer to the phenomena and the subjects of a study produces better qualitative data. Like Koch (2014), no one else is positioned as well as me to tell this particular story.

That said, I acknowledge that I am telling this from a very personal, interested perspective. Agreeing with Wolcott (1988) that all research is interested (including research that pretends it isn't), I take several steps to mitigate the possible hazards of my interestedness. One actually is to be overt about it. I know that my readers know of my involvement and that they can thus scrutinize my account for evidence (rather than just my own testimony) to corroborate the various claims I try to make. Secondly, I have collected and examined multiple forms of data, including 'blinded data' collected by a third party (two graduate students I don't otherwise know well who were recruited by my advisor) and an initial round of analysis of that data by UNL's Bureau of Sociological Research. The varying kinds of data allow me to triangulate various claims, while the blinded nature of much of the data, including the voices from surveys and interviews of many past Jacht participants, allows me to compare what I collected directly to what was collected by third parties. To the extent the former is similar to the latter, that suggests the former is not particularly compromised by sources, for example, telling me what they think I want to hear.

Purpose of the Study

The need for research in higher education has never been more important. Tight (2012) contends that the rise of the "knowledge society" and the pressures of

international competition resulting from globalization have resulted in the “massification” of higher education, shifting a college degree from an accomplishment accessible to only an elite few, to a system in which most people are expected to participate. Those funding this evolution, such as the federal government through Pell Grants and federally guaranteed loans, are holding institutions to greater accountability, asking for evidence that resources are being used effectively (Tight, 2012).

Additional pressures on universities may come from their own business needs, coming from boards of directors, much like any corporation. These can include the pressure to grow, campus enrollment numbers, increasing competition among institutions for decreasing numbers of prospective students. For example, a goal of the current University of Nebraska-Lincoln chancellor is to increase the student enrollment from 25,000 to 30,000 students by 2020. In his 2016 State of the University address, Chancellor Harvey Perlman stated,

“I remain content with the goals we set a few years ago to increase enrollment. . . We have made some progress, but we cannot rely alone on the units that have already demonstrated success. We must also stimulate and incentivize those units who have to this point not contributed as much as they could to our collective enterprise. . . We will continue to pursue our enrollment goals. . . I have full confidence we will reach our objective of 30,000 students” (State of the University, 2016).

Programs like Jacht can contribute to growth both by offering more direct niches for students and, less directly, by helping build the reputation of the larger institution and thus making it attractive to more students. But, either way, growth is in tension with quality. Is the priority more students or better programs for the students who do come?

For educators in this environment, there may be moral and ethical implications of producing increasing numbers of college graduates. Do we owe our students the type of

education that will help them get living-wage jobs? Is career development a function (*the* function?) of higher education? Is ‘in-house’ apprenticeship still within a larger enrollment and tuition paying structure as authentic as a traditional internship at an enterprise that is fully independent of a university? What role does a hands-on approach have in a research-focused, land-grant institution? Can more disciplines across the academy incorporate the type of ‘real world’ learning provided by Jacht? Is Jacht analogous to student teachers in practicums and student teaching community classrooms or to engineering students going through co-op programs? Is it possible to “grow our own” communities of practice, to provide students with valid apprenticeship opportunities? These questions are among those that fueled my interest in exploring an apprenticeship type of approach to a university-level advertising and public relations degree program and, more recently, to writing about it.

Meta analyses have found two main approaches to higher education research: a focus on policy and an emphasis on academic practice (Tight, 2012). Although this study focuses on practice, implied are policy decisions that support or inhibit experiential education innovations such as Jacht. These issues remain in the background of this case study, but reflect the questioning that has fueled the six-years-and-counting experiment that is Jacht.

The purpose of this study is to detail the creation and evolution of a university-level experiential education initiative, providing something of a six-year review of Jacht as an educational intervention. My approach has been influenced by design research and this study reflects that iterative process, using elements of case study methodology (Creswell, 2007) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, et al., 1984) A detailed history and

analysis of this particular case will add to the growing body of literature concerning experiential education for college students pursuing degrees in advertising, public relations, marketing, graphic design, or communications.

It will also be useful as background for any next director of Jacht. If experiential programs like Jacht are both worthwhile and sustainable in the long-term, then they need to be viable under a succession of directors. As already acknowledged, I am the founder of Jacht and have an interest in whoever succeeds me understanding what it has been and how it came to be. That does not mean I expect them to follow what I did (I don't; programs like this should evolve), but I think it will help them understand where they are starting from. I mention all this for a second reason: I hope this also helps convince readers that I have a stake in this account being as accurate as possible. If it distorts what Jacht is, then it is less useful as part of an eventual 'hand off' packet. (See Koch [2014] for another account of a program started by its author and described autobiographically in a dissertation, with that dissertation partially imagined as a hand off document.)

The intent here is to document the program as it has been developed and implemented, and as it has been perceived, remembered, and experienced by both faculty and student participants, utilizing five years worth of data collected through in-depth interviews, a survey, artifacts from the creation and implementation (e.g., syllabi, developed products), and observations from deep participation by the researcher. Such a depiction should help convey information about successes and challenges associated with starting similar initiatives, serving both as a history and as a blueprint.

I describe this both as a case study and a portrait (for reasons further explained in chapter 3) not because those labels are quite synonymous, but to emphasize that this is

both empirical and reviewable as such (per the logic of a case study), but it also attempts to explain design elements, participant passions, and that hybrid of intent, aspiration, and actual practice that matches what the education research literature has called portraiture. I intend that this study be seen as viable according to either frame.

It is hoped that this study can serve to inform educational practice regarding university program design options and experiences for students, as institutions grapple with complex issues. In documenting the case of one initiative to better prepare students in media-related disciplines for a rapidly changing work world, this study of Jacht Ad Lab can contribute to the scholarly literature by providing a detailed description of its creation, design logic, evolution, and current state.

Research Context

The research context is complex. Jacht is a class and a real business. It is an innovative class within a larger degree program (advertising and public relations) that is part of a group of media-related disciplines (broadcasting, mass communications, journalism) all of which represent industries that are undergoing radical change. Crampes et al. note that, “New media, new business models, and media convergence have drastically changed the media market conditions. . . Digital technologies have also deeply changed both the way information is transmitted and the way a specific target audience can be targeted” (Crampes et al., 2009, p. 8).

At the same time, higher education as an industry itself has been undergoing massive change. Almost 20 years ago, scholars expressed concern that the result of pressures from new technologies, changing demographics, cost increases, globalization

and the nature of employment “will be a profound deterioration in the structure of the higher education industry” (Collis, 1999, p. 57). As such, studying Jacht gives a glimpse into dynamics much bigger and deeper than just what matters to make an innovative class that is also a small start up effort, come to life.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) is a research-intensive, land-grant institution chartered in 1869 and now stands as the flagship of a four-campus system that also includes a campus and a medical center in Omaha and a campus in Kearney, Nebraska. UNL is the only unit of that system officially designated to serve the land-grant mission: “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

(<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=33&page=transcript>)

UNL’s mission statement reiterates the land-grant commitment: “Those responsible for its origins recognized the value of combining the breadth of a comprehensive University with the professional and outreach orientation of the land-grant University” (Role & Mission, 2016). UNL reported a fall semester headcount enrollment of 25,260 undergraduate and graduate students in 2015, the most recent year for which figures are available (UNL Factbook, www.unl.edu, retrieved March 13, 2016). This number represents an increase of 650 students across campus during the period of this study, from the 2010 launch of Jacht through the fall of 2015.

At UNL, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications (CoJMC) is one of the smallest academic units on campus. Originally a department within the College of Arts and Sciences, the college became a separate unit in 1979 and was originally called the College of Journalism. The change of the college name to the College of Journalism

and Mass Communications occurred in the early 1990s (journalism.unl.edu/history). This brought the unit in line with its accrediting body, the Association for the Education of Journalism and Mass Communications, which had added the words “mass communications” to its own name in 1982, to “reflect the rapid changes taking place in the field” (<http://www.aejmc.org/home/about/aejmc-history/>, retrieved March 13, 2016).

The term “mass communications” encompassed the disciplines of advertising and public relations, and its inclusion in titles at both institutions and the accrediting body also indicated the increasing importance of advertising and public relations programs in the sustainability and growth of traditional journalism programs. It seems fair to claim that the changes referenced by the accreditation association over 40 years ago have become even more rapid and more consequential since then. Increasingly in the 21st century, programs have been questioning the relevance of the term “mass communications;” targeted, one-to-one methods of communication through digital platforms have rapidly replaced the traditional mass media of newspapers, television, radio, and magazine.

CoJMC’s enrollment in Fall 2015 was 1,034 undergraduate students with an additional 38 students enrolled in the master’s programs. Rather than a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree, undergraduates are awarded a professional degree, a Bachelor of Journalism (BJ), upon completion of one of the three majors in the college: Advertising & Public Relations, Journalism, and Broadcasting. The master’s degree is a Master of Arts (MA) in Journalism and Mass Communications. In the 2014-2015 fiscal year, CoJMC awarded 288 BJs and 18 MAs. (http://irp.unl.edu/publications/fb15_16.pdf, p. 26)