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Improving Student Understanding of Writing Assignment

Guidelines and Expectations: Mini-Assessment

Cat Armstrong Soule

As a marketing instructor, it has been challenging to find effective techniques to help my students improve their written communication skills. I have found that many students are seriously lacking skill in this area and have little recognition of its importance. Many times students have told me that other instructors “don’t care about the writing” and only grade “on the content.” This oversight could almost be humorous, since a threshold concept in marketing is the importance of *effective communication* between a brand and its desired audience. My personal dedication to better teaching of these critical skills led me to participate in the 2014 Backwards By Design Workshop. I gained many valuable insights from the workshop, but this assessment is focused on a very specific strategy that was directly actionable for all my courses. This strategy was a redesign of the written assignment explanations to better highlight connections to the course’s threshold concepts, as well as to more clearly communicate the guidelines and expectations to my students.

In Fall 2014, shortly following the Backwards By Design Workshop, I taught an upper-level marketing elective titled Integrated Marketing Communications (MKTG 483). The course focuses on the “promotion” element of the marketing mix and uses both psychological and strategic perspectives to teach students how to effectively communicate with target markets. I had taught this course twice previously at University of Oregon. In this course, I assign a comprehensive team

project with several written components as well as two shorter, individual written assignments. Although the feedback on the course has been generally very positive, the students indicated in course evaluations that my expectations and guidelines for assignments were not clear. Unfortunately, this dimension has always been problematic for me and therefore, it is an area I have been very motivated to improve. I believe that redesigning the written assignments to focus on the “big picture” takeaways (or threshold concepts) and rewriting the assignment guidelines to clearly communicate has not only improved the assignments themselves, but has resulted in better student work, increased learning and satisfaction with the course.

I have been implementing these changes in all of my courses, but herein I will use MKTG 483 and one of the individual assignments as a case study. The redesign of the assignments first required a step back to consider the threshold concepts that I wanted to deliver in the course. One of the threshold concepts I defined was that brands make different choices about messages, creative content and media in order to “match” the goal and the intended target market. The first written assignment given in the quarter is intended to introduce this concept to students through written analysis of two advertisements for brands in direct competition. This intention was embedded within the assignment as it existed prior to Fall 2014 (see Appendix A), but once I explicitly defined this as a threshold concept for the course, I was able to tweak the assignment (as well as other materials) in a manner that allowed for better student self-discovery and deeper understanding.

Based on the group discussion “Moving Backwards from Responding to Assigning” as well as examples from *Engaging Ideas* by Bean, I redesigned the

assignment to more tightly focus on the threshold concept. The first step was to remove material that was extraneous to the goal of introducing the threshold concept through self-discovery. Secondly, I reformatted and reworded the assignment guide to provide more clarity to students in regard to the desired content (see Appendix B). I believe most effective change was beginning the assignment guide with the “purpose” section, which had not been explicitly communicated in previous quarters. Now, before reading the details of what to write about, students know to focus on how marketing communications rely on targeting choices and how brands make different visual and verbal choices that convey different value propositions. As I mentioned, these changes were implemented across all assignments and I believe that the changes greatly enhanced the course.

Prior to the redesign of my assignments, I frequently received feedback from students that my guidelines were not clear. For the course described in this mini-assessment prior to the redesign, students rated the “quality of explanations for the guidelines” as a 3.13 out of 5 (“adequate” but well below the departmental average). For the redesigned course, there was not a directly comparable evaluation metric (due to the fact the courses were taught at different universities). However, for the similar item “clarity of course goals and objectives,” the rating had increased to a 4.42 out of 5. Anecdotally, I also found that a higher percentage of students were able to make connections and communicate understanding of the threshold concept in their written responses.

The Backwards By Design Workshop was extremely effective in both motivating me to improve my courses and giving me new perspectives and skills with which to do so. I believe I am a more successful teacher in general, as well as having improved specifically in my goal to help students better develop written communication skills. I plan to continue to redesign assignments and other elements in all my courses with these tactics. I would also like to mention that I taught two brand new courses this year and the use of threshold concepts helped immensely in designing the courses from the ground up. In closing, I feel that implementing course threshold concepts paired with assignment redesigns around these concepts has improved student performance and learning in my courses. I will use these tools for the rest of my career for continual improvement in current courses and to better plan and design new courses in the future.

Appendix A. Original Assignment

Individual Assignment * 1

MKTG 420: Marcom

Winter 2014

Due 1/15 @ 12pm • Submit Via Blackboard

Communication Analysis

For this assignment, you will analyze two pieces of advertising from traditional media in detail. You will identify two advertisements, one each for two competing brands, or at least two products in the same product category. You need to provide me with access to the two selected examples, either through a hyperlink to a commercial or ad, a digital image of a print or out-of-home ad, or give me hard copies before class. I do not care which type of marcom you use, as long as it has a major **VISUAL** component (i.e. don't use a radio ad, or a PR event for example).

Do NOT pick examples that you or another student used or you will use for your marcom short, one that I have used in class, or that is in your textbook.

For this short written assignment, you will compare and contrast the two ads.

Your discussion should include:

- Provide the basics of each ad – what type of advertising, what vehicle, etc. Using the “12 Master Ads” we watched in class categorize your ads (separately) as one of the 12 master formats and explain.
- Describe surface characteristics of each ad *briefly* – people in ad (race, age, demographics, clothing, lifestyles); action – what happens in the ad; other aspects – music, lighting, mood, etc.
- Who is the intended target audience? What makes you think that?
- What is the PRIMARY message in each ad? What “unspoken” messages are present?
- Describe how this message is translated VISUALLY (images, fonts, colors, visual metaphors, etc.)
- What are the objectives? Use *the Facets Model of Effects* to explain and be specific here. Remember, there is probably more than one.
- What is the brand image being conveyed in each ad? What adjectives would you use to describe the brand based on this ad?
- Does the ad match the image of the brand that you currently have and why or why not? Are these ads integrated with other marcom you have seen for this brand? How well or how poorly and why?
- What are the similarities and differences between the two ads? Which ad do you think is more effective? Why?

Assignments should not exceed 3 single space pages, not including the visuals. I grade written assignments 75% for content and 25% for writing. Be sure to include class concepts and vocab in your assignment.

Please let me know if you have any questions and have fun!

Appendix B. Reworked Assignment

Assignment: Individual Written Assignment (75 pts)

Option 1: Communication Analysis

- Purpose:** The purpose of this assignment is to:
1. Deepen your understanding of targeting with marketing communications and get practice analyzing and describing types of advertising.
 2. Thinking through the visual and verbal choices made by brands in order to communicate value propositions.
 3. Practice your written communication skills.
- Description:** For this assignment, you will analyze two pieces of advertising from traditional media in detail. You will identify two advertisements, one each for two competing brands, or at least two products in the same product category. You need to provide me with access to the two selected examples, either through a hyperlink to a commercial or ad, a digital image of a print or out-of-home ad, or give me hard copies before class. For each ad your discussion should include:
- What is the primary message of the ad? What is the value proposition presented by the brand? How is it communicated? Describe how this message is translated VISUALLY (images, fonts, colors, visual metaphors, etc.) and VERBALLY (copy and spoken).
 - Who is the intended target market? How can you tell?
 - Basics: What medium and media? What type of ad appeal is used (can use the master formats and/or *Facets of Effects*. What is the ad's objective?
 - Does the ad match the image of the brand that you currently have and why or why not? Are these ads integrated with other marcom you have seen for this brand? How well or how poorly and why?
 - What are the similarities and differences between the two ads? Which ad do you think is more effective? Why?
- Deadlines:** Due before class (10am) on 10/13 and submitted via Canvas
- Details:** Format: .docx Visuals and multimedia should be included when relevant. Length: should not exceed 3 single spaced pages, not including the visuals.
- Evaluation:** You will be graded on:
Content (75%): Accurately covered relevant information (above), IMC aspects, **use of vocab and class concepts**, had done research, went beyond surface level
Written Communication (25%): Overall flow and tone of paper is professional and there are no typos or grammatical errors. See the Tips For Business Writing posted on Canvas.
- Caveats:** Do NOT pick examples that you or another student used or you will use for your marcom short, one that I have used in class, or that is in your textbook.

If you have questions, please ask me directly!
Also, have fun exploring the world of marcom and picking your examples.