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## Course Content Student and Instructor Collaboration

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# Course Content Student and Instructor Collaboration

*Kathleen Ferris-Costa*

**I**n 2021, I was tasked with developing a marketing elective focused on personal branding. Many of the marketing techniques used to market the brand of a product or service can also be used to market the brand of an individual. This course would focus on how students can review and revise their personal brands to be more authentic and marketable.

The students in the course had already taken a marketing principles course and were knowledgeable of marketing basics. The main goal of the course was for students to apply what they already knew about marketing products and services to marketing their own personal brands. There are numerous marketing techniques to assist students in assessing and revising their personal brands, which made it difficult to decide which ones this course would address. I wanted to ensure these topics were important and relatable to the students. In an effort to engage the students in the course curriculum, I invited them to collaborate with me in choosing which topics would be included in the course content. Based on their areas of interest, the course learning outcomes would be developed, and the appropriate assignments and assessments would be created by the students and instructor.

The first day of class students were handed a syllabus with the course content section blank. As a class, they would develop the course content and determine what areas of interest would be included in the curriculum. It was important for me to share with them my reasons for doing this. This was a collaboration between the class and the instructor to create the course curriculum based on the needs and interests of the students taking the course.

I stated I could easily create content I felt was appropriate for this course, but I would rather it be a team effort. I was also hoping the students would be more vested in the course and their learning since they would have skin in the game by participating in the decision-making process.

The majority of them seemed enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in structuring the course: “I’ve never had a course that has done this before. I’m excited to have a say in what we learn and how we are graded.”; “I like that we get to decide what we are doing in the class and interested to see what other students want to learn about.” As with any process, there were a few naysayers: “I’m the student, not the teacher.” Overall, the students were up for the challenge and genuinely interested in the process.

During the first class session, we discussed personal brands and the components associated with a person’s brand. “A personal brand is about purposefully and strategically showcasing your authentic self to your audience and your customers. Your personal brand should be a true reflection of your skills, passions, values, and beliefs” (Tyler Basu 2022). Students were separated into groups to discuss the many elements that make up a person’s brand (i.e., abilities, behaviors, education, interests,

etc.). They also discussed the tools used to communicate an authentic personal brand and how to effectively present them to potential employers (i.e., social media content, resume, networking, interviewing, etc.). After the class discussion, students were asked to individually submit in writing or video the top 10 things they would like to learn about to improve their authentic personal brands. Some of the comments during class discussion included, “I’m interested to see if my top choices are the same as others.”; “I didn’t realize everything I say and do represents my brand.”; “I don’t know if I can limit it to 10, I have a lot of work to do to improve my brand before I apply for a job.”

As the instructor, I accurately predicted what things would be on most students’ lists, such as how to write a strong resume, how to do a job interview, how to interact with business professionals, and what to put on social media. The remaining topics were numerous and would be based on students’ individual needs and interests. For the next class session, I created a spreadsheet of all of the students’ suggestions and ranked them in order of interest. The list was presented and open for discussion. I found it to be important to share all of the results. It gave the students an accurate picture of what their peers were interested in learning, which may or may not be the same as theirs. The class was reminded topics chosen are based on the entire class’s suggestions and ranked by importance, so all of their individual suggestions may not appear on the syllabus. It was interesting to hear why students wanted to focus on specific topics. It gave them a good sense of each other’s weaknesses and why they wanted to address certain issues. The students were actively negotiating and compromising to come up with the final list of topics.

After much class discussion, a clear learning outcome was developed for each of the suggestions chosen, and

assignments and assessments were created. As the instructor, I finalized outcomes to make sure they were appropriate and measurable. Based on the students' feedback, I refined the specifics for each of the assignments and assessments and made sure to explain how they related to the learning outcome. Giving students a backstage look at how learning outcomes, assignments, and assessments are created provided them with a better understanding of how each of the components need to complement one another to be effective learning tools. I stressed the trial-and-error process. Sometimes you have to try an assignment to know it doesn't fit the learning outcome. This also holds true for the assessments. Student responses included, "I didn't know so much work went into creating assignments."; "I like to know why I'm doing something and it's not just busy work."; "I usually pass right over the learning outcome, but now I know why it's important."

There were times when the type of assignment was very clear. For example, for the learning outcome "create a professional resume portraying your authentic personal brand," students participated in a resume-writing workshop and were given an assignment to write a resume. Once a draft was complete, a career services professional critiqued it and the student had the opportunity to revise prior to submission. For this resume assignment, multiple assessments were agreed upon. All resumes were blindly evaluated by a peer to determine the overall brand perception of the resume's content and structure, while the instructor graded it for content and professionalism. This triple evaluation (career service professional, peer, and instructor) provided valuable feedback to students and allowed them to make the necessary changes to how they were presenting their brand to others. Some student responses were, "I like getting feedback on my work and the chance to make changes before

it is graded."; "Knowing I have a strong resume decreases my anxiety about looking for a job after graduation."; "I really need to double check my work ... my reviewer said having multiple grammar errors makes me look like I don't care about my work which is not true."

In identifying the appropriate assignment type, students liked having options. For example, if they had to provide feedback on a particular discussion topic, they wanted the option to write a paper or record a video. It's important to meet students where they are and give them the opportunity to be creative and choose how they want to present their abilities. However, there are some instances where I encouraged students to step outside of their comfort zones. If I sensed apprehension about a particular situation, I encouraged them to challenge themselves. For example, a student who had a fear of public speaking was encouraged to do a video instead of writing a paper. Overall, students liked having options: "I like being able to choose how I do an assignment. I get stressed out when it comes to making a video and would rather write a paper."; "I like making videos, I can be more creative."; "I used Flip for the first time and it was easy."

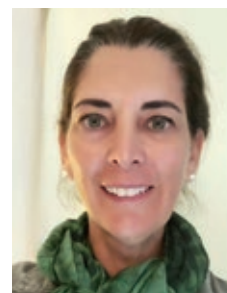
After each assignment was evaluated, there was a post discussion about whether or not the assessment type chosen was best and if the evaluation process showed an accurate reflection of the students' abilities in learning the specific outcome. Student responses included, "I think a video would have been better than the PowerPoint presentation."; "It would be nice if all teachers asked for student feedback on assignments."; "If my only option was to do a video, I think I would have been too nervous to do well."

As you can see, there is more work involved upfront when you are collaborating with students to develop course content. Yes, it would be easier to do it

yourself prior to the beginning of the semester, but the results are worth the extra time and effort. This collaboration with my students gave me the opportunity to build a rapport with them and provided better communication and sharing of ideas. The class discussions were more active, and students were more willing to share their personal experiences and opinions which fostered a greater sense of community.

Learning is a two-way street. To keep our courses interesting and engaging, we need to involve our students in the process of creating course content. If participating in such collaborations seems overwhelming, I encourage you to start small. For example, permit your students to decide what type of assignment they would like to do that would represent their understanding of a particular topic or learning outcome. It can be a "free choice" assignment. Give students the option to convey their understanding by writing a post on Padlet, creating a video on Flip, creating and commentating a presentation on Screencast-O-Matic, or simply writing an essay. Have fun with it!

These types of student and instructor collaborations promote improved communication and understanding of one another. Students see things differently and can offer a fresh perspective providing new ideas and opportunities for teaching and learning, making it engaging for both the students and instructor.



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