# Assessing the power of social media marketing: A cooperative educational learning experience

KARIN REINHARD<sup>1</sup> LARS SATOW

Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University, Germany

PAUL FADIL

University of North Florida, USA

In 2009, collaboration between students at the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University Ravensburg (DHBW Ravensburg) in Germany with a psychologist lead to the development of a marketing plan for the social media website Stop-Simply.com. The purpose of this exercise was threefold: to create a sound strategy for the website to deal with future growth and development; to provide students with a unique opportunity to work on the emerging social media platform, a platform that could play a significant role in shaping business practices in the future; and to meet the learning objectives of the DHBW Ravensburg.

This paper presents an insight into the venture's stages of development and lists its critical success factors. It also illustrates how a group of students can participate in a sustainable social project, this resulted in the creation of a Community of Practice, which has helped over 10,000 people quit smoking. Finally, the paper shows how social media marketing was successfully implemented into the overall curriculum of the DHBW Ravensburg. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2012, 13(1),39-53)

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The Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg (DHBW), known in English as the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, was founded in 1974 in Stuttgart, the capital of the German state of Baden-Württemberg. Today, eight main locations and three branch campuses, combined with a close network of regional partner firms, form the pillars of the DHBW group of universities (Müller, 2009).

On 1 March 2009, the state of Baden-Württemberg changed the legal status of these former universities. The practical element of the degree programs offered at the DHBW was given extra recognition. In addition, the DHBW was granted research status. These two key changes have provided the DHBW with status equal to other institutions in the tertiary sector.

The DHBW offers a broad range of bachelor degree programs in the fields of business, engineering, and social work. The five unique features offered by the DHBW are firstly that all the degree programs attract 210 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits, in contrast to the standard 180 credits for a bachelor program, to reflect the professional experience element; study programs are intensive in nature, in that the student completes their three-year bachelor studies with no semester breaks a contract of employment with a DHBW partner firm is a pre-requisite to studying at the DHBW, meaning that all students have to meet both commercial and academic recruitment criteria; fourthly, students receive a monthly salary for the duration of their studies and have the insurance status of employees, making the DHBW model a financially attractive means of completing their undergraduate studies; and fifthly, students alternate semesters between work and study, so that the acquisition of practice and theory remain closely linked.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: reinhard@dhbw-ravensburg.de

Students are likely to learn concepts in one semester that can be applied in the next semester at their partner companies; it is, therefore, important that the learning be practical, useful, and experiential (Reinhard, 2006). These three values provide the core learning objectives of the DHBW (DHBW Präsidium, 2011).

In addition to DHBW professors, lecturers from other universities and technical colleges, and experts practicing in the fields of industry and business, contribute to teaching at the university. This ensures a high level of academic as well as practice-oriented teaching. The DHBW's close relationship with experts and partner firms provides opportunities for research projects. This paper will illustrate the development and impact of one of these projects, Stop–Simply.com website, which offers assistance to people who wish to stop smoking.

The project was undertaken in the Media and Communications Department in Ravensburg, Germany, a part of the Business School at the DHBW Ravensburg. The Media and Communications Department currently offers four courses. Each course follows a program-wide standard curriculum for the first two years of study. The focus in the third year is discipline-specific. For example, students may elect to study in advertising, digital media, publishing or journalism to focus on an area of expertise. The 17 students who formed the project group were taught in "Integrated Internet and Media Management" and were embedded in the journalism course. Social media management is a relatively new area of study that crosses both journalism and business fields. As this area continues to develop, students who gain knowledge in both journalism and management are poised to take advantage of the new opportunities that this new area will present. Lecturers from the DHBW Ravensburg and Dr Lars Satow, a psychologist with extensive experience in information technology, knowledge management and online learning, gave introductory lectures on social media marketing and Communities of Practice to students.

A section on business models in Internet Management forms a part of the DHBW curriculum. Due to previous work, covering how business models in the media industry work and whether a virtual community can be seen as a business model, (Hess, 2002; Markus, 2002; Wirtz, 2003) and the popularity of the electronic age, the "4 C net" business model was selected as a focus for more detailed study. A cross-disciplinary project group, in collaboration with the international business department, initiated work with Dr Satow. The following section will describe the issues prompting the formation of a project group and set out the resulting project objectives.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Dr Satow launched the Stop–Simply.com website non-profit business model in 2007 with the expressed purpose of assisting people who wished to stop smoking. According to the World Lung Foundation and the American Cancer Society, tobacco will kill six million people worldwide in 2010 (Shafey, Eriksen, Ross & Mackay, 2009). In Germany, 33.9 percent of adults smoke, and 140,000 people are dying every year as a result of smoking (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2009). Dr Satow has since published some of his own experiences, from a psychological point of view, with the University of Berlin (Satow, Lippke & Schwarzer, 2009). The Stop-Simply site was initiated, together with the German state Department for Health and Psychology, due to the concern over such grave statistics. The site is currently hosted by a number of voluntary psychologists from the Freie Universität Berlin.

Students need to understand how new business models work and how to communicate with an audience in a digital environment. It can be expected that if students were to learn how to do this, they would be able to leverage new market ideas, products and services through social media networks (Weber, 2007). Vygotsky (1962) encourages the change in teaching methods from the traditional face-to-face to more active learning, which he refers to as learner-centred teaching. Active learning provides numerous advantages to students. Some of these advantages include greater understanding of required information (Kale, Fadil & Gupta, 2009); increased retention of course material (Gupta, Fadil & Kale, 2009); and opportunities to develop practice solutions to realistic problems (Fadil, Kale, & Gupta, 2008). It also allows students to become more entrepreneurial and to enhance their marketability. The overreaching objective of this field research project was to develop an understanding of the impact of social media on communication and the potential of transforming a virtual Community of Practice into a business model.

Instead of receiving a classical face-to-face lecture, students developed a sound understanding for the use of social media in marketing and entrepreneurship. According to Harvey, Geall and Moon (1998), work-integrated learning (WIL) programs can be quite useful when they are strategically planned, organized and appropriately implemented. These curricula provide the perfect platform to create a hands-on learning experience for students as they develop a useful skill-set for today's business environment. Zegwaard, Coll and Hodges (2003) call for a stronger integration of students' technical and behavioural skills. Reinhard and Singh (2011) agree with Zegwaard et al. (2003) and go further, stating that WIL programs should develop strong learning objectives and outcomes that reflect the views and needs of students, employers and professors. To this end, the experiential nature of the chosen social media project fits within the stated learning objectives of DHBW.

Stop-Simply.com is a virtual Community of Practice that is used to help people stop smoking. Students were asked to create a marketing plan that would help to convert this non-profit Community of Practice into a company that would be a profitable investment for the health care industry. In a classical WIL approach, the student research project's main goal was to create knowledge and excitement for social media marketing topics, while at the same time introducing research elements into the curriculum at the DHBW at Ravensburg.

The website, Stop-Simply.com, has grown in popularity to the point where it has become impossible to manage it without a marketing strategy. Therefore, the DHBW, together with Dr Satow, decided that developing a marketing strategy was not only desirable but necessary to ensure future growth and success. The derived business model would provide improved quality and a wider range of content. The suggestions the current users for improving the site were taken into consideration during the design of the new model. One of the first modifications was to enable easier access to people seeking help.

The aim of this study was to transform a non-profit virtual community into a profitable business model in an attempt to develop students' entrepreneurial skills. Since entrepreneurial development is a major learning objective of the DHBW, it was also a welcome learning aspect of this particular project. These skills were utilized by employing two methods: benchmarking possible business models and establishing a suitable business model.

#### RATIONALE

This study demonstrates the ability of the DHBW to demonstrate the values of cooperative education. This research is important because courses offered as a co-op model or WIL are increasing in popularity and it will serve as a benchmark for other initiatives.

Dr Satow, the founder of the Stop-Simply.com community, has specialized knowledge of social media and its contributions to the contemporary knowledge of the media and communication fields. Due to his expertise, the DHBW Communication and Media Department in Ravensburg will be able to position itself as a department that provides high-level academic studies as well as innovative practice-oriented teaching. The benefit of this collaboration has already been demonstrated. Leading organizations have approached the academic departments to design various Facebook strategies for them. For example, Siemens Corporation and Tognum Corporation have both requested a comprehensive online social media marketing strategy, which would include utilization of the Facebook platform.

Students have benefitted from this project because they were exposed to industry-related project work, particularly in the field of new industries, such as social media marketing. In times when graduates are sometimes temporarily unemployed, another benefit of these skills is that they now have a strong motivation to start their own business model and business venture. The students receive a certificate of completion itemizing the different activities that they participated in. This will be useful to them when they apply for various jobs upon graduation.

As previously stated, the main aim of Stop-Simply.com is to help people to quit smoking by exploring this community and communicating with people online who want to stop smoking, then providing them with support to do so. Furthermore, it motivates smokers to build optimistic individual and collective self-efficacy expectancies through discussions with psychologists. These are some of the solutions that have been employed to cure an addiction (Satow et al., 2009). The following section will discuss the theory that was presented to students to improve their knowledge within social media and to enable them to work on the joint project to transform the non-profit site Stop-Simply.com into a profit making business model.

# EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA - VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Chris Shipley, co-founder and global research director for Guidewire Group, is often considered as the first person used the term *social media* as is understood today (Weber, 2007). The BlogOn 2004 conference held in July 2004, focused on the social media. Shipley and the Guidewire Group used the term *social media* in the months leading up to the conference to discuss the incorporation of blogging, wikis, social networks, and related technologies into a new form of participatory media. Virtual communities were part of these discussions. The term was also used by Tina Sharkey (co-founder of iVillage and now head of BabyCenter.com) in 1997 to describe a form of community-driven Internet content.

A generally accepted definition of a virtual community cannot be found in scientific literature or in literature orientated towards its application. The plethora of terms and definitions abounding in the field can be explained by the multi-disciplinary nature of the research area as well as by the numerous observable characteristics of virtual communities in practice. The terms *virtual association, online community* and *web community* are used synonymously. The following definition can serve as a basic principle for further reflection:

A virtual community is a number of people who team up due to a common interest, a common problem or a common assignment and for whom the interaction is independent of space and time as well as of their actual physical location. (Leimeister, Bantleon & Kremar, 2002, p.3)

The challenge of space and time was overcome by innovative information and communication technologies (ICT). There are many application areas of virtual communities in and between organisations and these reach from customer relationship to management across the coordination of internal knowledge transfer to the point of virtual communities as ICT-enabled forms of organisation for both the customer and supplier (Herstatt & Sander, 2004).

Virtual communities arose out of the social need for communication and commitment between human beings for a variety of reasons. Unlike communication in the real world, virtual communities are based on computer-supported communications, which have both advantages and disadvantages. An advantage can be that users can communicate anonymously with one another on sensitive or private topics. Conversely, anonymity can allow the spread of false or negative opinions, to the disadvantage of other users. There are an increasing number of commercially orientated virtual communities, which are driven by economic interests. From the point of view of the supplier, the commercial function is customer acquisition and retention, and the integration of the customer in terms of value-adding functions. Relevant for the customer is the transparency of the product or service being offered, the active shaping of price and content of the service, additional services, entertainment and dependability, which can be gained though interaction with suppliers and other customers. This led to the emergence of the term *Community of Practice* (Mörl & Groß, 2008), which will be discussed in the section below.

# VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: STOP-SIMPLY.COM

Stop-Simply.com was launched in 2007 as a Community of Practice. By 2011, the website had over 17,000 members (Stop-Simply.com, 2011). Communities of Practices are successful and effective in collecting and sharing knowledge and experiences between participating members, as well as in attracting and engaging new members. The term *Community of Practice* was coined in 1991 by Lave and Wenger when they were rethinking how the practice element could be successfully applied to business, education, governance, and the social sector (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They emphasized that successful learning always takes place in a social context and that the community is important for building and sharing knowledge and experience. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define Communities of Practice as:

... groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (p. 4)

Communities of Practice have been successfully applied by organizations in the field of business, in education and in the social sector, to actively create and share knowledge, innovate and create a direct link between learning and performance. With the increasing popularity of the Internet, the practice has also been applied to online communities mostly in the context of knowledge management (Bourhis, Dubé & Jacob, 2005). Little research has been conducted on Communities of Practice to explore how might encourage healthy behaviours, such as quitting smoking.

## Elements of Communities of Practice

*The domain:* All community members share a common interest and are committed to the domain. They value their collective competence and learn from each other. In the case of Stop-Simply.com, all members are trying to stop smoking and value those members who have been successful for their support.

The community: Members build relationships which enables them to interact and learn from each other. They help each other by answering the questions of new members or by motivating members who failed in their first attempts to stop smoking. Experienced and successful members become mentors. A website in itself is not a Community of Practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a Community of Practice. Therefore, Stop-Simply.com was designed from its inception as a community.

The practice: Members of a Community of Practice are users who develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, methods, and ways of addressing recurring problems. At Stop-Simply.com these shared practices are documented in forum and discussion groups as well as in success stories created by Stop-Simply.com mentors. Shared practices are also reflected in the stop smoking course that is part of the community and is updated regularly, based on member feedback.

# Elements to describe success of Communities of Practice

Wenger et al. (2002) describe seven principles for successful Communities of Practice. These principles have been applied to Stop-Simply.com.

Design for evolution: Communities of Practice are created naturally and voluntarily. They suggest that design elements should be catalysts for a community's natural evolution. At Stop-Simply.com, the main elements have been introduced in alignment with the growth of the community, e.g. a chat functionality only makes sense if is possible meet other members at any time, because it requires many active members who are logging into the community on a daily basis. Therefore, the chat functionality was introduced after one year, when Stop-Simply.com had approximately 5,000 members.

Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives: Good community practice design requires an understanding of the community's potential to develop and steward knowledge, but it often takes an outside perspective to help members see the possibilities. Therefore at Stop-Simply.com this was provided by psychologists who were counselling and helping members. The psychologists could be freely contacted by members at any time, e.g. to answer questions about the best methodology to quit smoking.

Invite different levels of participation: Communities of Practice often have three main group levels of participation (core 10-20%, active 15-20%, passive 60-75%). At Stop-Simply.com, the picture is a little different. Firstly, there is a group of experts who are represented by the psychologists. They answer questions and participate actively in the community. The second group is that of active mentors. Mentors have successfully stopped smoking for at least 10 weeks and are willing to help others. These mentors participate in the community on a daily basis as well (about 10 new mentors per month). The third group is the members who are currently trying to quit smoking (about 1000 active members per month). The fourth group represents members who either successfully stopped smoking or have failed to do so. The majority of the latter group leave the community after about 10 weeks or only join the community once a month.

Develop both public and private community spaces: Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that successful communities should not only focus on public spaces, such as public events, but also on private, one-on-one networking. They believe that these informal, backroom discussions actually help orchestrate the public space and are imperative for successful meetings. The one-on-one networking creates a conduit for sharing information with a more targeted group of people, using the coordinator's discretion as a gate. Every phone call, e-mail exchange, or problem-solving conversation strengthens the relationships within the community. On Stop-Simply.com, many private spaces exist to strengthen the one-on-one networking. For example, members can send private messages to mentors or psychologists and small groups can meet in the chat room and discuss private issues.

Focus on value: A focus on value is essential to community life, because participation in most communities is voluntary. At Stop-Simply.com, the value the Community of Practice delivers to the members is motivation, help, support and trust. For example, new members often question whether they really should try to stop smoking. They fear withdrawal symptoms and a loss of identify. In this phase, other members who have already decided to quit smoking can provide valuable, authentic guidance and advice to them.

Combine familiarity and excitement: Wenger et al. (2002) advocate that, like a neighbourhood bar or café, a Community of Practice should become a place where people have the freedom to ask for candid advice, share their opinions, and try their ideas without fear of repercussions. For many members at Stop-Simply.com, this familiarity and excitement is the reason they participate on a daily basis. Most members of Stop-Simply.com have been attracted by its ease of use and have not been active in any other online community before.

Create a rhythm for the community: At Stop-Simply.com, members have created the rhythm by chatting by themselves in the morning, at lunch time and in the evening. If someone passes an important milestone in his\her initiative to quit smoking, it is celebrated in the forum. Twice a year, members and mentors arrange a contact event where all active community members come together to network.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF STOP-SIMPLY.COM

The online Community of Practice Stop-Simply.com offers three main sections:

Firstly, a free online stop smoking course: The psychological concept of the online course is based on the Health Action Process Approach, which is a theory developed by Professor Ralf Schwarzer (Schwarzer, 2008; Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2008), from the University of Berlin. This approach encourages healthy behaviour, such as non-smoking, good eating habits and regular sport activities. It promulgates that healthy behavior is driven by optimistic personal beliefs, such as self-effectiveness expectations and outcome expectations. It implies that the likelihood to successfully stop smoking depends on personal beliefs, such as 'I can quit smoking, even if it is hard for me at the beginning.' This is a self-effectiveness expectation. An example of the outcome expectancy is, 'if I quit smoking, I will reduce the risk of dying from cancer significantly (Satow et al., 2009, p. 117)

Therefore, the main goal of the online course is to help people to quit smoking by motivating them and building optimistic individual and collective self-effectiveness expectancies. To achieve this goal, the course includes instructional audio-tracks (podcasts) which can be downloaded and listened to at any time, videos of interviews with experts and victims of the

cigarette industry, and guidelines for planning their first days without smoking. For every milestone without smoking, a special status is granted to the members, similar to the ranks awarded to members in judo. This rank is visible to all members and functions as an additional motivation.

Secondly, there is a free discussion forum with chat opportunities. This forum allows all members to post their questions and to provide answers. For every question posted, community points and a rank are awarded to the member. The chat is open to all community members at any time and allows for one-on-one communication as well as for synchronous many-to-many discussions.

Thirdly, free online counselling is offered by psychologists. Five psychologists, with substantial experience in online counselling, work on a voluntary basis for Stop-Simply.com. They answer questions and provide feedback to the members. They also help to organize meetings and other events.

Stages of development and research questions

Wenger et al. (2002) describe the lifecycle of Communities of Practice as having five stages: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship and transformation. The stages develop from informal networks to mature communities. Stop-Simply.com is currently moving from stage 3 to stage 4. The stages pertinent to Stop-Simply.com is outlined below.

Stage 1: Potential. When Stop-Simply.com was launched in 2007, it started with the free online stop smoking course and offered counselling by psychologists. Members were able to comment on the course steps and provide feedback. Psychologists were answering questions and collecting suggestions for improvement. This phase was important so as to improve and discuss the course and to generate interest from members.

Stage 2: Coalescing. The forum was introduced during this stage. Members interacted with each other in order to discuss methodologies, pitfalls and to celebrate successes. The forum generated a new dynamic among members and was the first step towards a establishing a Community of Practice. The forum was moderated by mentors. The chat facility was introduced when membership numbers reached 5,000. The chat allowed for direct and synchronous interactions between members. It was common practice to have members chatting during their lunchtime and some mentors spent the entire day giving advice to new members.

Stage 3: Maturing: This is the current stage in which Stop-Simply.com sees itself. It faces the challenge to grow the community both in membership and in depth of knowledge and experience members share. Wider boundaries and new concepts for the future development will be explored and defined during this stage.

Step 4: Stewardship: The goal of this stage is to establish a prominent role in the field and to establish stewardship for addressing leading-edge issues. Therefore, the following goals for the collaboration with the DHBW Ravensburg have been defined: to increase membership and the depth of shared experiences of Stop-Simply.com and to establish a prominent role in the anti-smoking movement, while keeping the tone and focus of the community.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF WEBSITE BY STUDENTS

After hearing the theoretical content, the students themselves decided on the virtual Communities of Practice they would look at in order to develop a for-profit model. Based on this research, they designed a social media marketing plan for Stop-Simply.com.

The suggestions made by the students can be classified into four categories: value proposition, improvement in members' identification with Simply-Stop.com, search engine optimisation and marketing, and social media marketing.

# Value proposition

The students defined the core value proposition (CVP) for Stop-Simply.com in a two-day workshop as:

- Providing evidence-based help and expert advice free of cost;
- Supporting and motivating members through individual offerings; and
- Connecting people by providing an easy-to-use platform.

These values distinguished Stop-Simply.com from other programmes which are normally not free and/or provide advice without empirical evidence.

Improvement in members' identification with Stop-Simply.com

To improve member identification with Stop-Simply.com, the students developed a concept around quarterly meetings of Stop-Simply.com members. The meetings are organized by members in several parts of Germany. In addition, products such as T-shirts with the Stop-Simply.com logo were manufactured.

Search engine optimizations and marketing

Based on a competitive analysis, the students suggested optimizing Stop-Simply.com for search engines, such as Google and Yahoo. They identified five relevant German key words with a high search volume to focus on. These five key words are most likely to generate leads for Stop-Simply.com. (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Key Words for Search Engines

German	English	Search volume	
		per month	
Nichtraucher	non-smoker	110,000	
Raucherentwöhnung	smoking cessation	60,000	
Rauchen aufhören	stop smoking	33,000	
Endlich Nichtraucher	finally a non-smoker – popular book title in Germany	12,000	
Nichtraucher werden	become a non-smoker	4,000	

## Social media marketing

The students also developed a concept to use social media for marketing purposes, e.g. by allowing the members to write their own blogs, provide RSS feeds, tweet their status and progress directly out of Stop-Simply.com, and founding groups in other social networks, such as *wer-kennt-wen* (a popular network in Germany).

### Results

In a first step in May, 2009, the following measures – with a focus of social media - were implemented:

- All pages and functionality of Stop-Simply.com were scanned and updated in alignment with the defined core values;
- The first community event, organized by members, took place;
- Stop-Simply.com T-shirts were offered;
- Stop-Simply.com pages were optimized to include references to the above-mentioned key words;
- RSS feeds for the forum were implemented as well as personal blogs; and
- Stop-Simply.com groups in other social networks were started.

To monitor the success of these activities, key indicators had been defined:

- Landings per month on the start page of Stop-Simply.com. This is the number of accesses to the landing page of Stop-Simply.com;
- New registrations per month;
- Position on Google's result pages for the target key words. Here the average ranking was taken for Simply-stop.com on Google's result pages for the five key words; and
- Satisfaction rating. Visitors to Stop-Simply.com were asked to rate the overall programme on a four-point scale (1: very bad, 2: bad, 3: good, 4: very good) and whether they would recommend the site to their friends.

TABLE 2: Online Marketing & Community Health Indicators: Change over time

	2008	2009	2009	2010	
	November	May	November	May	Delta
Indicator		(when	(after	(one year after	(between
		improvements	implementation	implementation	May 2009 &
		were	of some	of	November
		implemented)	improvements)	improvements)	2009)
Landings	7,883	8,888	9,256	7,475	+ 17%
New registrations	242	507	543	356	+ 7%
Average ranking for relevant key words	6.2	5.6	6.8	7.2	-1.2
Satisfaction rating	3.4	3.6	3.5	3.4	-0.1
Recommend to friends	93%	100%	100%	100%	0.0

As shown in Table 2, visits to the landing page as well as the number of registrations increased between May and November 2009, which is remarkable considering the short time frame of only six months.

Unfortunately, there was a decrease in average ranking on Google's result pages. While in May 2009, Stop-Simply.com was ranked on average at position 5.6 for relevant key words, in November it held a significantly lower ranking at position 6.8.

One year after the implementation, the number of visits dropped again to under eight thousand and the number of new registrants fell to under 500 per month. It seems that the effect of the one-time activities carried out by the students last for about six months. Continuous efforts are required to promote a community such as Stop-Simply.com and keep it up in the search engine results pages in the long term.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS PART OF INNOVATIVE COOP CURRICULUM

Based on the outcome of this study, it was found that social media marketing was a beneficial topic in which to engage students. This demonstrates the applicability of this topic, and justifies its inclusion in the academic curriculum.

The experiential exercise described above and the associated findings proved to be a suitable way of including WIL and applied research into cooperative education as required by the state authority. The student groups worked on a project which significantly raised their interest and knowledge in this area and they were able to generate scientifically defendable results.

It was evident from the study that the emerging field of social media marketing provided the students with not only a platform to express their innovative ideas and marketing creativity, but also a real-world learning experience that they could utilize in their respective companies. They came to appreciate social media as a practical and low cost advertising instrument. It also provided an opportunity to open the communication channel with the younger generation, while experiencing what could very well be the way business is conducted in the future. This student experience also revealed new and unique job opportunities that they may decide to incorporate into their future career paths. In conclusion, the project provided a significant learning experience for the students and illustrated how social media markets could be leveraged to provide profit-making and job-creating opportunities.

The students' perception of their learning experience showed that it was significantly more effective at enhancing interpersonal and communication skills than that of an undemanding group learning cohort. However, while it is accepted that the implementation of cooperative learning requires more commitment and organization on the part of the students, their high interest level in the project justified this extra effort. In fact, the students' views of their skill enhancement from participating in this activity far outweighed any negative perceptions of extra work necessary to perform the tasks effectively.

Two methods of measuring student learning were administered. A test was given over the content of the project and presentations were subsequently made. In both cases, the students performed significantly better than they did in a traditional lecture environment. Students were able to analyse the material in greater depth and with much more clarity than before. Their performance on each rubric reflects their acquisition and retention of knowledge from the project. For example, in their presentations, they were able to speak about the nuances in

the community in a depth they could never have achieved from studying out of a book or by taking notes in a lecture. Specifically, by placing an advertisement on the website and tracking its outcomes or responses, they were able to gauge the advertisement's effectiveness from a social marketing standpoint. Thus, by utilizing WIL, the students became more engaged and learned at a higher level by increasing the depth of their analysis.

Regarding the improvement of so-called soft skills, students stated the benefits of the project on two levels. First, in the immediate academic context, students' knowledge base and cognitive ability profited from alternative points of view expressed within the group. Specifically, their own communication skills, which were necessary to convey their opinion, improved drastically as they were forced to provide statements that were both clear and cogent. Additionally, the requirement to structure the study patterns to accommodate others within the group benefitted the less organized students across their own individual range of studies. Secondly, the students' career development will be well served by improved interpersonal, communication and networking skills, which cooperative learning appears to deliver.

The students were also able to discern several disadvantages and limitations in using social media marketing. They quickly realized that this form of marketing would not be accessible to all smokers wanting to quit. For example, the typical consumer would have to have access to a computer, be aware of the site, and understand how to browse the Internet. Tey also spoke of the importance of the privacy settings that seem to be emerging in regard to these platforms, such as Facebook (Mims, 2011). Furthermore, they realized the difficulties in changing an organization's perception of social media marketing. The students were able to evaluate these weaknesses and determine whether the disadvantages would impede traditional operating industries' acceptance of a different type of marketing tool.

In general, studies have shown that traditional educational methods do not provide students with the foundation on which to build a strong business plan (Blötz, Ballin & Gust, 2002). They focus on tactics rather than strategic analysis and see social media marketing as creative execution rather than a blend of creative and strategic thinking (Högsdal, 1996). Moreover, since there is little experiential learning from face-to-face lectures that can be applied to other business courses, students tend to forget the material delivered from one course to the next. To combat the problem of *information dumping*, the WIL project offered a realistic, manageable exercise for students studying Media and Communication Management. It presented them with the opportunity to significantly improve and develop a vitally important skill-set. Specifically, students were required to conduct independent research, use critical and creative thinking to analyse research findings, identify new service opportunities, and present their conclusions and recommendations in both a cohesive written format and a formal oral presentation. By using realistic and accurate information, the students were able to propose actionable ideas on the subject of digital media management.

The outcome was a successful conversion of a Community of Practice into a fully functional business model. The students were able to gain in-depth knowledge and invaluable experience in the field of social media marketing. Based on this exercise and the subsequent examination, it was also quite obvious that the students retained the material that they had learned. The students were actually able to generate ideas on how to create a relevant business model in a specific social marketing scenario. They also gained experience in implementing their business plan as Satow utilized many of their ideas within the context of the current website. Student test and presentation assessment results of this WIL course,

when compared to a class taught in the traditional lecture format, were positive, and the student learning objectives of this course were fully met. Furthermore, this project allowed the students to realize the effectiveness of social media marketing in combating serious social problems. Students clearly expressed an interest and desire to do more research in this area. They found the learning experience from this WIL project both rewarding and fulfilling.

One of the main benefits, in their opinion, was that they had the chance to learn something that "wasn't taught in their degree". While a university degree may teach how to evaluate social media models, it does not prepare students for the numerous idiosyncratic problems that may occur during the implementation of this social media model in a multinational corporation. The students found that what they had learnt at the university so far was background knowledge that they could use to complete their tasks. However, this project assured them that they could conduct further learning and research in order to progress. Since the assignment given was out of industry and the students were challenged the think outside of the traditional academic paradigm, the work experience that they were involved in during this project was invaluable. Furthermore, this project truly afforded them the opportunity to build a bridge between their academic studies and their future practitioner careers. Finally, there were certain practices and methods which were employed, such as search engine optimization, which are considered presumed knowledge, and not specifically taught in the Media and Communication department at the DHBW Ravensburg.

Interestingly, the students experienced that it is acceptable for them to not know the answer to everything. In a normal university environment, one is expected to learn everything that is in a course and then regurgitate it later for the exam. However, when taking their knowledge outside of academia, students soon realized that although they have a strong foundation for solving various issues that may arise, each situation is unique, so they cannot possibly prepare for every contingency. The reaction to this epiphany can be quite devastating to students who do not have prior work experience. The students on the project learned that, in practice, it is far better to have an understanding of what it is that you have to do and how you want to go about doing it, than to know every detail. This also applies to their experience in a professional environment.

Finally, this student exercise is particularly suited for cooperative education students as they have a more hands-on relationship with industry than students from traditional universities. The DHBW is now in a strong position to cooperate with numerous institutions and enterprises, thereby facilitating commensurate partnerships such as the one described in this article.

### **CONCLUSION**

The DHBW Ravensburg has created many collaborative relationships with industry partners, which have produced numerous opportunities to combine expertise. Students have taken these opportunities to work with compatible institutions and enterprises to produce successful strategies and plans. This project demonstrates the significance and value to the DHBW of implementing cooperative projects like this one. In the field of cooperative education, institutional partnerships can be extended to serve the research and developmental needs of the relevant institutions and their students.

This collaborative project helped the students to understand the impact of social media marketing and realize the benefits of entrepreneurship in new industries. The invaluable skills and experience that they have garnered will expand their opportunities in the social media marketing field and increase their employability, which is the main objective of any institution. Successfully achieving this objective will not only enhance the reputation of the DHBW Ravensburg, it will give graduates of this university something they truly covet, a strong competitive advantage.

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### ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

Cooperative education/WIL in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. More specifically, cooperative education/WIL can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education/WIL programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

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Manuscripts and cover sheets (available from the website) should be forwarded electronically to the Editor-in-Chief. In order to ensure integrity of the review process authors' names should not appear on manuscripts. Manuscripts should be between 3,000 and 5,000 words, include pagination, be double-spaced with ample margins in times new-roman 12-point font and follow the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in citations, referencing, tables and figures (see also, http://www.apa.org/journals/faq.html). The intended location of figures and diagrams, provided separately as high-quality files (e.g., JPG, TIFF or PICT), should be indicated in the manuscript. Figure and table captions, listed on a separate page at the end of the document, should be clear and concise and be understood without reference to the text.



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