



Jan-Parker, Israr. (2013). Creating an integrated design for learning in the discipline; action research on retail management unit. *Dialogue*, January 2013 (3), pp. 39-59

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Creating an Integrated Design for Learning in the Discipline (EDU118);

Action Research in a Retail Management Unit

Israr Jan- Parker

1.0 Introduction

This action research project explored the effects of embedding a variation of assessment type to a group of level 6 students on a Fashion Management with Marketing (FMM) course at Southampton Solent University (SSU). The project sought to identify whether a practical/vocational “live project” could simplify the existing assessment criteria and thus help students to manage their workload effectively. The research also examined the relationship between a live project and:

- Student engagement
- Employability skills

The report provides background information to the course, a brief discussion and literature review surrounding action research is provided as an added contextual element, followed by methodology and ethical considerations to the action research. Subsequently a rationale which includes critical awareness of quality enhancement issues both at national and University level. Data analysis of the action is provided and is discussed in the context of “situated learning” framework provided to the students with a literature review included in this section. A critical reflection and recommendations concludes the report.

1.1 Drivers for the action research

The action research was carried out on the “Retail Management” Level 6 unit (Ba (Hons) Fashion Management with Marketing course), comprises of the following units and assessments in Period 1 only.

Unit	CAT	Assessment
Brand Development & Communication Strategies (delivered by Fashion school)	30 Assessed in period 1	1 x 4000 word report 1 x 10 min presentation 1 x Project
Retail Management (delivered by Fashion school)	30 Assessed in period 1	2 x 4000 word report
Contemporary Strategic Marketing Management (delivered by FBSE)	20 Part assessed in period 1	2 x class test 1 x 2000 word report

Table 1

The issue identified in Table 1 is that the 2 units, Brand Development & Communication Strategies and Retail Management, are strikingly over assessed compared to other 30 CAT point units in the Fashion School. A critical External Examiner's annual report influenced the need to address assessment methods on the FMM course. Other key drivers for the action research research includes the need to improve NSS scores and to embed employability within the criteria in line with the University strategic goal.

1.2 The Problem

- An immediate solution was needed and be put into effect straight away.
- The existing assessments outlined in period 1 unit descriptors must remain the same due to time factors relating to Minor Modification procedures. Over assessment and workload may, however, affect student engagement with the course.
- The stress of the workload of the above may result in students producing a lower quality of work and not realise the learning benefits.
- All of the above may compound and result in another poor external examiner report and low NSS scores.

1.3 The Solution

- Introduce an innovative live project to reduce research work and simplify the Retail Management unit's assessment
- Revitalise student's interest in the course
- Improve students employability

2.0 Project set up - Rationale with Literature Review

The core writers that have influenced and help identify the problems, are key Government reports by Lord Leitch (2006) surrounding employability, Southampton Solent University's employability aims and Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning frameworks. Solution to this project was based on the paradigm of how people learn at work. Due to time constraints, and the nature of academia set up, it was decided to run the research as an action research which will be addressed later on in the report.

2.1: Rationale for practical/vocational live project assessment

It has been stated earlier in the report that in period 1, level 6 students are expected to produce 3 x 4000 word reports. Each report has a similar process in relation to research, analysis, evaluation and proposal. The introduction of a live project in the Retail Management unit (See Appendix 1 for old and new brief details) will ensure students gain a different learning experience and to put into practice theories from previous learning. The report for the live project will be an evaluation of the team's efforts, strategy, tactics etc. The task will therefore be simplified by:

- Reducing the research work and utilising learning from previous units, which will result in positive engagement by the students whilst improving their employability skills

The project dovetails with some of the current issues in assessment, whereby development of skills for the "real world" is highly desired, in particular employability and work related learning. Employability is being employable and refers to the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace, (Lees, 2002). In 2006, Lord Leitch's report, "Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills", examined the UK's long term skills needs and recommended that the UK commit to a new vision - "to become a world leader in skills by 2020". It also extended the depth and breadth of many University courses. At Southampton Solent University, the skills and employability agenda has been embedded within the University's key strategic goals with notable investment through the "Strategic Development Projects".

Employers demand much more than a degree from graduates and "more than half of recruiters warn that graduates who had no previous work experience at all, are unlikely to be successful during the selection process and have little or no chance of receiving a job offer..." (High Fliers 2012). The career opportunities for students undertaking the Fashion Management with Marketing course include; Retail Management, Fashion Buyer, Fashion PR, Fashion Marketer, Trend analyst etc. The fashion retail sector is fast paced with fierce competition amongst the many brands. The recession had a devastating impact on the High Street fashion retailers where many brands such Oasis, Warehouse, Coast, to name a few, closed almost half of their shops. In an interview with Next Plc in 2012, the HR officer

concluded “We are happy to train graduates, but we also want graduates to come in with experience and just get on with the job too”.

All of the above provide a strong case for the trial of a practical assessment at level 6. It should be noted that although the assessment is a practical exercise, a written evaluative and reflective report is still required from the student in order to fulfill the current unit descriptor’s learning outcomes.

2.2 Situated Learning Framework

Situated Learning is related to Vygotsky’s theory where his paradigm posits “knowledge is constructed through experience rather than acquired knowledge”. Discovery Learning is another constructivist theory originated by Bruner (1966) which believes that learning takes place in problem solving situations and where the learner draws on his /her past and existing knowledge. According to Heeter (2005), situated learning usually involves engaging in tasks which parallel real world application. The goal is to improve learning by motivating students and providing a rich context for learning. A learning environment is considered “authentic” if the tasks parallel real world situations (Heeter (2005)). It is considered that students who work on authentic learning tasks, learn associated facts and skills because they need to know these things to accomplish the task. Ulber and Theil (2004) considered there to be four principles that characterise situated learning: situatedness, authenticity, (these are similar to Heeter’s “real world” context, self regulation (where participants take control and manage problematic situations) and cooperation where the group work together.

The origination of situated learning theory comes from Lave and Wenger (1991) who argue that learning is situated, and that learning is embedded within activity, context and culture. It is also unintentional rather than deliberate. The theory is depicted in the diagram below and will be applied to the Big Sell Off live project.

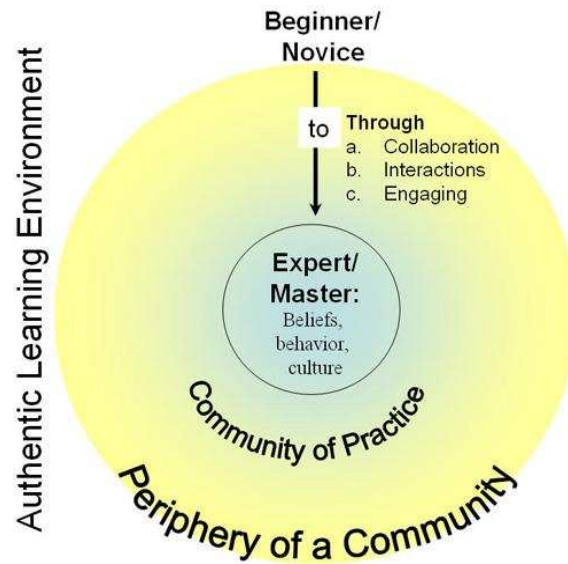


Figure 1 Legitimate Peripheral Participation - Lave and Wenger (1991)

2.3 Practice Based Research

The action research approach for The Big Sell Off was favoured for the following reasons;

- Duration time for the research could be varied to fit with the curriculum
- Results could be easily measured within a short timescale
- Realism in relation to setting up the action research (live project) could be arranged with some ease
- Results could be validated using a triangulation method
- The use of surveys and interviews also made data analysis quick and easy
- Direct feedback from participants

3.0 Action Research Methodology - Process

Multiple methods of observation techniques were used in the methodology of the action research.

These included;

- Observation (recorded on camera)
- Interview (recorded on camera)
- Questionnaire (post live project)
- Student self reflection within students report

The observation was carried out by the researcher and three other tutors who volunteered to help record the event. The students were interviewed on camera during and post the live project about the learning that took place.

An anonymous questionnaire gained quantitative data on the action research and an individual reflection on the project within the students written assessment was obtained. The written reports provided a rich insight into the students’ level of engagement and the benefits of participating on the live project. The reports are too big to incorporate within the appendices, small sections, however, have been included in appendices. The variety of research methods described above ensured that any weaknesses or biases could be overcome.

4.0 Ethical Issues

Southampton Solent University advocates that ethical clearance must be obtained before any research project or enterprise activity can commence and potential human participants can be approached. To satisfy this criteria, an application for the ethical clearing was made and the research criteria was explained to the students involved. Students were made aware of health and safety issues around the different locations, how to take care of their props and for any heavy lifting to be pre-arranged with the Estates department.

5.0 Qualitative and Quantative Analysis

The group of 58 students were split into 4 groups and tasked with the details in the brief (see Appendix 1). Additional challenges were included to encourage and test the utilisation of different skill sets (see Table 2 below).

Challenge	Skill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Each group were provided with strict number of garments and replenishment guidelines - Stock room distant from pop up shop - Working with new people - Card sales processed only through the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination of team roles and stock control - Communication skills within the team - Peoples skills / professional conduct - Customer service/team work

<p>Student Union</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create own float - Limited sales locations around the University - Same product across all teams with the same target market - Each group followed by camera for 5 days to add pressure and for reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accounts and budgeting - Negotiation and organisation - Creativity and communication - Professionalism
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Table 2

5.1 Qualitative feedback from observers

<p>Orange Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovative by changing name from Red to Orange because of sponsorship from “Orange Rooms” - Negotiated big prizes - Marketing included; posters, screens around the University, facebook - Secured a trading spot for 5 days - Good team spirit, well organised with clear roles - no arguments - Calm leader - Trading position played an important role in the success of the task - Excellent customer service 	<p>Yellow Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opted for guerilla marketing tactics - Secured trading spot for one day - Gained sponsorship from the sports center for prizes - Purchases could be made online via facebook - Free goodies bag - Lacked organisation in terms of location and communication - Friction within the team was not managed professionally - Excellent sales pitches - Traded outside normal hours (Carnage event)
<p>Blue Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First day had a striking pop up shop and was the first team to set up - Drafted in male models - First half of the week the group were very enthusiastic but towards the end of the week became less so. - Did not trade during the day on Wednesday but attended a sports event 	<p>Green Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very enthusiastic about selling and guerilla strategy - Used fictional character kermit the frog as mascot. - The last to set up shop on the first day and appeared uncertain of what tasks should be attended to first. - Strengths and skills of individual

<p>in the evening to sell (not successful). This was a high a risk strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Team leader couldn't keep the team together, too many arguments and lack of communication and professionalism. 	<p>members of the team were not identified by team leader.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Later in the week the roles were redefined which produced better results. - Excellent customer service was reported and observed - Better organisation towards the end of the live project as lessons were learned - Team leader kept team enthused
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Table 3

5.2 Qualitative feedback from students

All teams gave positive feedback with regards to the activity. The groups which were most organised, calm, professional and adjusted their strategy on a daily basis, appear to have benefitted the most in relation to sales and engagement. The group feedback is limited as not all members of the team spoke out and students may also have been reluctant to speak their minds in front of the camera. The next individual questionnaire and reflective report will provide better insight into how the live project was received. Feedback from the student's individual reports can also be found in Appendix 3.

<p>Orange Team (winning team)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Performing badly on the first day motivated us to work harder - Consistency of location helped - Best thing we have done so far on the course - Practical experience that will help us in the future 	<p>Yellow Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We were not very organised and therefore lost our trading location - Ran out of money - The new groups helped us to work with different people and make more friends to socialise with - It is hard running a retail shop
<p>Blue Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some members of the team lost interest and became demotivated - The decision to not trade during the day cost us and that is what made us demotivated. 	<p>Green Team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We learned alot about ourselves and working in a group - It was important to define our goals - We all had to sell which was something we learned later in the week - maybe

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our team got fragmented and communications went down hill - The project was good but not realistic to a real retail environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> too late) - Stressful but good experience
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Table 4

5.3 Quantitative analysis of questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was designed to give students the opportunity to feedback on their experience on the Big Sell Off live project. The questionnaire covered the researcher’s interest and provided quick data giving an overarching picture of the live project. Key findings from the survey (see Appendix 2) depicted that the students enjoyed working in a group and that the live project gave them good a understanding of the important operational issues that need to be considered in fashion retail. All students also agreed there should be more practical projects. The limitation with this questionnaire was that it was too short and the students were not able to qualify or clarify any of their answers.

6.0 Situated Learning Framework - The components of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) applied to the Big Sell Off live project.

Authentic Learning Environment - The Big Sell Off live project produced an environment that was authentic for trading and generating profits. The group work created opportunity for testing team work, organisational skills, time management, problem solving and people skills. Competition was evoked through the other rival groups.

Components of LPP	The big Sell off live project
Legitimate - All parties accept the position of unqualified people as potential members of the “community of practice”	Level 6 FMM students are divided into 4 groups (Blue, Green, Orange, and Yellow). Each member of the group accepts that this is a new experience to everyone and no member is an expert in any of the groups.
Peripheral - Parties hang around the edge of the important stuff, do the peripheral jobs and gradually get entrusted with more important ones.	Green team approached the live project much slower than the other teams. It was evident on the first day, that they scanned the activities of the other teams before gaining confidence to start selling.

<p>Participation - Through “doing” knowledge is acquired. Knowledge is therefore situated within the “practices” of the community of practice.</p>	<p>All the groups gained knowledge (lessons learned) through participation.</p> <p>For example;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orange - discovered the benefits of a consistent location - Yellow - it is important to be organised when running a business (overlooked the booking of trading space) - Blue - lack of research lost them a day of trading - Green - identifying strengths within the group should have been addressed sooner
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Table 5

Having identified the periphery of the community, Lave and Wenger move inwards towards the middle of the diagram (see Figure 1) to address “Communities of Practice” (CoP). A community of practice has three components:

1. Community - Social learning can only take place when there is a common interest in a subject eg: the common interest for the FMM students is “The Big Sell Off”. Communities are formed when there is a sharing of ideas, strategies or solutions determined. Learning is an incidental outcome that accompanies the social processes of regular interaction within a group. It was noted that the learning outcomes in the “participation” section, were all incidental from the students experience. Therefore the lessons learned were through situated learning.
2. Domain - This implies that a commitment to the domain and not just membership. To be part of a CoP, it is assumed that the member will engage and participate in the group. The FMM students were very committed to the domain as it was part of the assessment for the Retail Management unit. Therefore participation and engagement was high.
3. Practice - Member of CoP must be practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources including stories, helpful tools, experiences, ways of handling typical problems, etc. It was observed on the Big Sell Off, that all group members were practitioners and shared many resources including all the learning that took place in their first two years of the degree, below are some examples;

- Green group: Two members of the group worked in retail, therefore shared stories and tips on merchandising and stock control
- Orange group: One member had a good contact with the “Orange Rooms” bar, thus negotiated sponsorship, another was an avid fan of “The Apprentice” and therefore remembered and shared good practice anecdotes from the show to the rest of the group.
- Yellow group - Three members of the group were very proficient with indesign package and therefore were able to design striking posters.
- Blue group - Four members of the group were returning students from a placement year. They had all worked in marketing departments, therefore they were able to share their expertise on creating a strong image for the group and trying different tactics such as using a model.

The individual reports provide insight into the learning that took place after the live project (see Appendix 3). The students report that “ As the week went by, communication within the team improved, helping to manage the stock levels better”, others commented on “keeping an eye on the competitors gave them ideas for improving their own strategies”. Observers recorded that each group were strengthening their bonds through interaction and collaboration. The Orange and Green team appeared to have stronger communications, evident in their strategies and improvements in sales as the week went by. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), only through “collaboration, Interactions and Engaging” can novice participants move to become experts at a particular job.

It is worth noting that the live project could not be emanated according to Lave and Wenger’s situated learning experience (1991). They advocate a “live project” run over a longer duration to allow participants to slowly gain confidence from being peripheral observers to active participants. The live project only ran over 5 days, meaning that all participants had to “get stuck in” straight way to complete complex tasks.

The students made comments relating to Ulber and Theil’s (2004) “situatedness” where they were actively promoting and making sales of the collegiate range; this in turn addressed the “authenticity” of the tasks in solving complex problems such as addressing location issues and how to record sales. There was much cooperation evident in all the groups where members of the groups shared ideas about working together and formulating pop up shop strategies. The students could relate many theories (from previous learning) to the practical tasks such as motivation theories, leadership, retail strategies etc. Most students understood the importance of working in a team and the benefit of experiencing how a retail shop could be run. The students acknowledged within their reports that the Big Sell Off

was not a typical selling model for a retailer, however, the principles were the same (delivering good customer service, time managements, budget management and handling unexpected problems).

7.0 Summary

The action research suggests that the live project had a positive impact in all three key areas that were put to test; Manage workload, student engagement and employability skills.

Action research	Evidence of Affect/Outcome
Live project helped students to manage their workload	All students passed this assessment. More than half of the students agreed that the live project had reduced the amount of desktop research.
Student engagement	All observers reported that there was a positive “buzz” created around the University. Students expressed their enjoyment on the live project through reports and feedback. Students saw the benefit of working alongside their peers and within different groups. External examiner noted the live project as “excellent” and students reported to her the fun element of learning that took place.
Employability skills	In the written reports students identified improvement in processes, people management skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, selling skills, visual merchandising skills. In the questionnaire all students agreed that they had noticed a positive change in their skills before and after the live project.

8.0 Recommendations

- To ensure the student's engagement was not the simple result of an Hawthorne effect (where the student's motivation to engage in the course increased because they were being listened to by their tutor), another live project should be conducted and this has already been actioned through a period 2 FMM Event live project and another "big sell off" in October 2012.
- To devise a deeper questionnaire which will reveal more about the student's relationship with their peers, tutors, live project and the task set.
- Through the inclusion of the "extra challenges" the students were exposed to think about processes and solve problems. However, many of the students expressed that the extra challenges were unrealistic to the "real retail environment" and they did not see the benefit to having the challenges. This is an area that will need to be addressed.
- A live project is short lived and the learning is very intensive, this experience could be further explained by an industry speaker to instil the learning deeper. For example many retailers put on short lived events such as fashion shows, the preparation and challenge of executing end of season sales etc.
- The videos from the live project be used to demonstrate good practice of team work and for classroom discussions surrounding visual merchandising, people management and problem solving.
- Plan a post live project activity which includes a grid to log the employability skills the students have gained.

9.0 References

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Find out more

Orange team video- the orange team won the competition
<http://youtu.be/53NnZDF6o8M>

Yellow team video
<http://youtu.be/W1SZkFx1jvo>

Blue team video
<http://youtu.be/AqBRqTk1a34>

Green team video
<http://youtu.be/LsyVMldBM7c>

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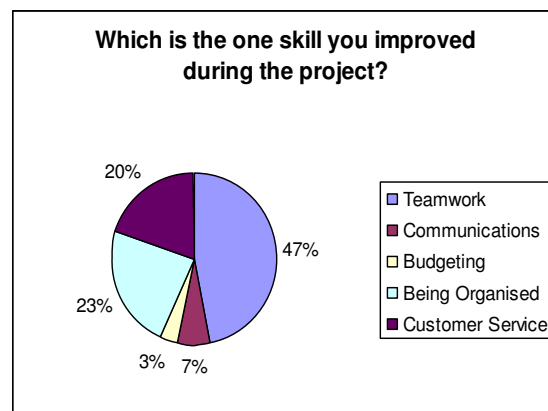
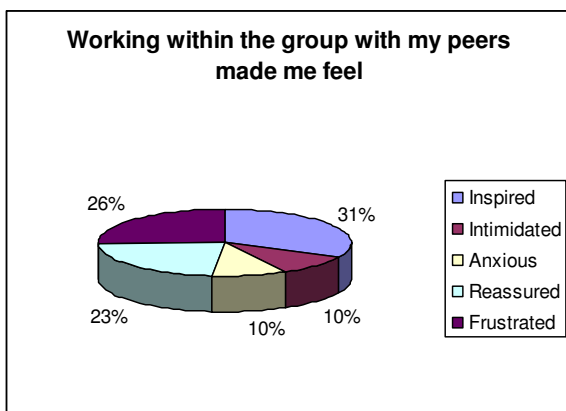
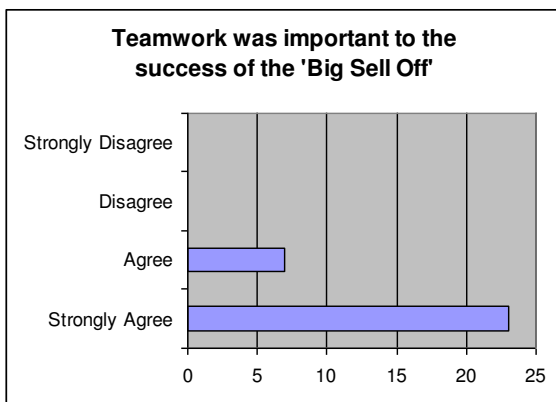
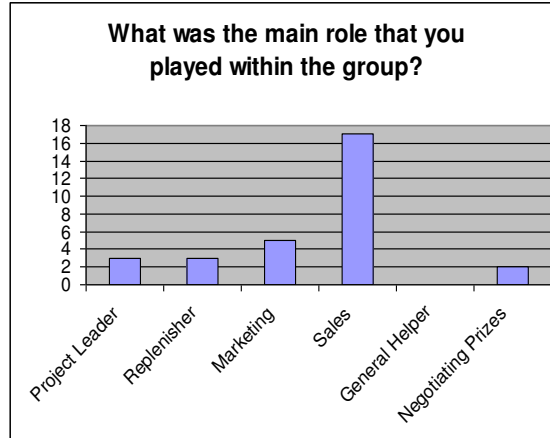
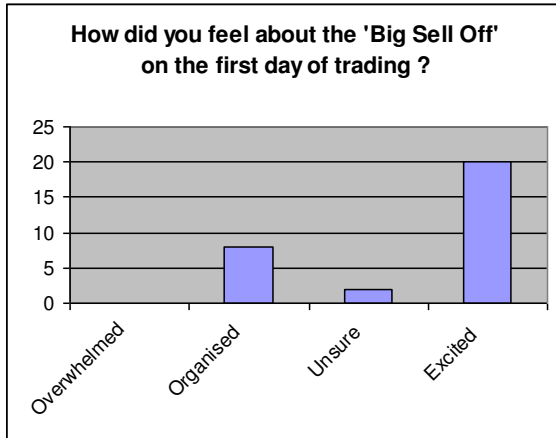
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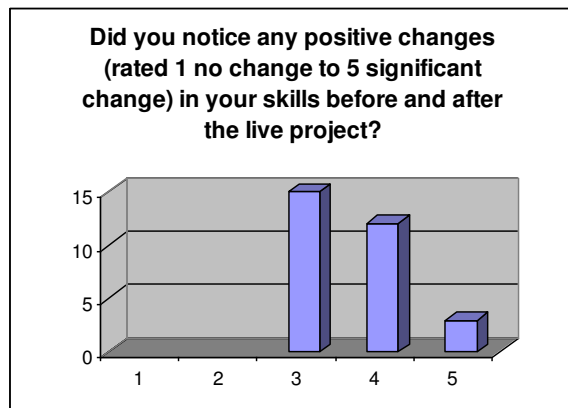
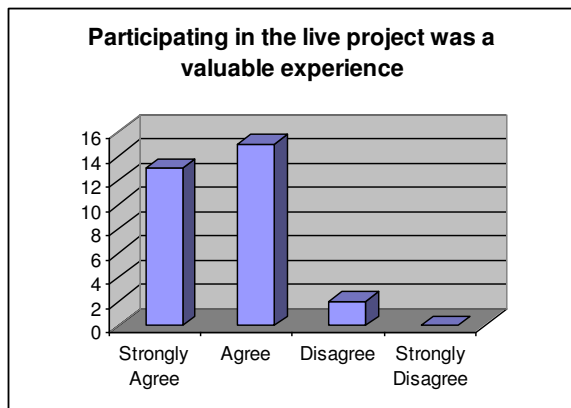
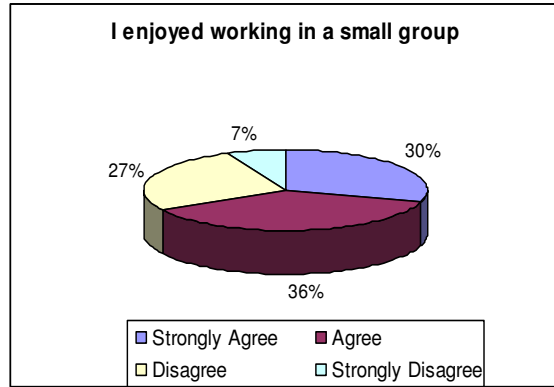
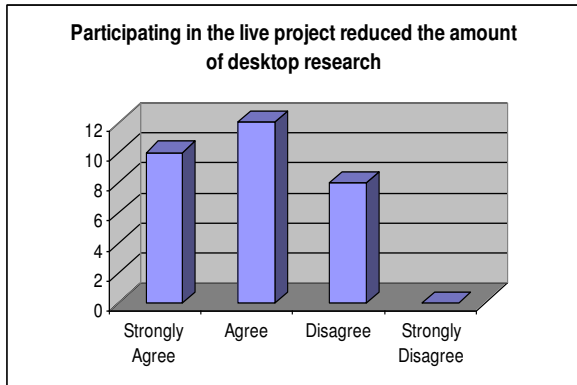
Appendix 1 : Retail Management Assessment Brief

Old Brief	New practical/vocational Live Project brief
<p>Background</p> <p>During the recession the UK fashion market has been driven by the young fast fashion and value propositions. The mid market and brands with weak communication and product propositions have suffered, some disappearing from the high street.</p> <p>Over the next 5 years many industry commentators predict that the demographic shift towards the more affluent and more mature markets will support retailing opportunities for strong niche brands and quality orientated multi - channel propositions. Clear consumer propositions that build a relationship with the consumer will be the key to success.</p> <p>The relatively strong performance and level of activity within the department store and premium on-line retail sector supports this prediction.</p> <p>Brief</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -You are to produce a report that clearly identifies the theoretical concepts that underpin an evaluation of consumer behaviour with regard to fashion purchase motivation. Through an exploration of the key consumer demographic, cultural and lifestyle trends you are then to identify an important market segment that you believe has the opportunity for a new concept launch. - You should develop consumer insight through primary market research that may be used to develop your product and brand proposition for later assessments. - You are to identify a segment of the market where there is the potential to transform a brand proposition, either through the repositioning of an existing business or for the development of a new fashion brand/ label through the application of consumer analysis and insight. This segment needs to 	<p>Background</p> <p>The Big Sell Off</p> <p>According to one report, (POPAL, 1987) as many as two-thirds of customers make their decisions in store. Hence, point of sale (POP) displays are critical for influencing consumers in the final decision making process. To this end pop-up-shops (PUS) have seen a dramatic success rate through clever positioning and POS.</p> <p>Both POS and PUS have a short life cycle, they must be continually refreshed to remain effective. This involves clever management of product, people, environment, logistics and budget.</p> <p>Brief</p> <p>This is an exciting opportunity to work in a group on a live project, “The Apprentice” style. Your group is responsible for managing and selling the new collegiate range of SSU clothes for a period of 1 week.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each group will need to devise an innovative and powerful strategy to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Prepare the clothes for retailing b) Account for stock c) Manage takings d) Plan marketing e) Assign roles to individual group members 2. Each group will then execute their strategy to generate sales. The groups will be competing with each other for the most sales and the most effective retail strategy. You will be given specific instructions on how to take money and replenish stock etc. 3. Following the selling activity, you are required to write an individual evaluative report detailing the effectiveness of your group’s strategy and operational

<p>offer the opportunity to develop a unique brand(ed) proposition with a defined and scalable target customer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The focus must be on the premium sector, with a well-defined niche opportunity evident in the market supported by data analysis, and primary market and consumer research. The opportunity may be for a single brand opportunity or for a new product assortment and appropriate brand adjacencies and corresponding multi-channel propositions. - You need to develop your report with an outline evaluation of both the scale and opportunity offered by a clearly defined and researched target consumer. Your report should explore the channels of distribution appropriate for the target market and outline the development of a channel strategy. - You should conclude your report with a synopsis of the brand development concept, or the identification of the existing brand that you believe requires repositioning or transforming to better satisfy the customer segment. - You may recommend the purchase of or collaboration with existing heritage labels or design resources. However, the cost of doing so must equate to the potential financial opportunity, details of which will be developed in report AE2. <p>The brand communication strategy will be delivered within the brand communication unit.</p>	<p>tactics. Compare your learning to the strategies currently employed by small to medium sized retailers. It is essential your report includes;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Introduction b) Executive summary c) Competitive evaluation of the live project d) Positioning strategy supported by theory e) Discuss supply chain in relation to small-medium sized retailers and apply to your experience on the live project f) Discuss the importance of people management with reference to your live project g) Sales, margins and outline a sales forecast h) Risk assessment. <p>Finally, your report should include reference to wider reading e.g. journals, books, websites, Mintel and Keynote reports.</p>
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Appendix 2: Questionnaire Analysis





Appendix 3: Feedback from individual written reports

“Team members not taking equal responsibilities”

“Not selling on Wednesday was a mistake”

“The team recognised that motivation did play a part in the sales slowing down”

“The team worked together as everyone was respectful and considerate of one another helping out when needed..as the selling week went on the orange team became better at setting up the pop up shop and displaying the range which helped to increase sales and interest”

“After analysing the sales history, it is recommended that the stock allocations contain a higher number of grey products”

“The live project was a beneficial, interesting and diverse venture which allowed independence and application of knowledge to a realistic environment”

“Having to set up pop up shop everyday was time consuming”

“The BSO was a fun activity that provided the team with good insight into the function of a real retail environment...the product price was a major contributor to our poor sales”

“The big sell off is a primary example of just how cut throat the world of fashion retailing has become”

“Throughout the BSO motivation within the yellow team went from high to low, and the project manager failed to motivate the team”

“In a real retail environment, customers would not be taken to a different location to pay by cards and also stock would be much closer to replenish”

“ As the week went by, better communications within the team was developed, this helped to manage the stock levels better”