

Beyond Lectures:
Insights from Business Discipline-
(Reflections, Transformations, and the Human
Side of Teaching)

Chief Editor
Dr. Azila Jaini

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CAN MARKETING LESSONS GO BEYOND THE CLASSROOM?

Nur Auni Afifah Abdul Karim, Azila Jaini, Sharmin Baba

Introduction

Digital marketing is commonly taught within formal classroom settings, where emphasis is placed on concepts, frameworks, and digital tools such as social media platforms, content strategies, and online customer engagement. These approaches provide students with essential theoretical foundations; however, they often remain confined to simulated contexts that do not fully reflect the complexities of real-world digital marketing practice. Although students are generally familiar with digital platforms in their everyday lives, this familiarity does not necessarily translate into the ability to apply marketing principles strategically, ethically, and purposefully in authentic situations.

This observation prompted critical reflection on our own teaching practices as a digital marketing educator. While students were able to articulate digital marketing concepts accurately in assessments and classroom discussions, many struggled to adapt these concepts when faced with real audiences, organisational constraints, and community needs. Recent study also emphasises that digital marketing pedagogy should incorporate experiential and applied learning elements to strengthen students' strategic thinking (Alalwan, 2021). The gap between conceptual understanding and practical application is also faced by Higher Education (HE) to increase the graduates' employability while developing good skills in facing life competencies (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023). Consequently, this reflection led to a central pedagogical question: Can digital marketing lessons go beyond the classroom?

In response, a Service-Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) project was incorporated into a digital marketing course, allowing students to engage directly with community partners and apply digital marketing concepts in real-life contexts. Through this experiential and community-based learning approach, students were required to analyse audience needs, design digital content, and implement marketing strategies that were both contextually relevant and socially responsible. Service-learning has been widely recognised as an effective pedagogical approach that enhances students' critical thinking, civic responsibility, and ability to connect academic knowledge with real-world challenges (Chika-James et al., 2025).

The integration of the SULAM project also transformed our role as an educator. Rather than functioning primarily as a transmitter of knowledge, I adopted the role of a facilitator and mentor, guiding students through reflective practice, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making. This experience highlighted the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching, particularly as students navigated uncertainty, collaboration, and accountability in authentic learning environments. Through these reflections, this topic explores how extending digital marketing education beyond the classroom through service-learning can humanise the learning process and contribute to the holistic development of both students and educators.

From Theory to Community Practice

Although the SULAM project was part of the course requirement, what made it meaningful was the way students slowly changed how they saw themselves in the learning process. In this project, they were not the ones managing the social media accounts directly. Instead, they acted as guides and advisors to real food and beverage SMEs. Their role was to analyse the businesses' current digital presence and suggest improvements across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp Business. This advisory position required them to move beyond completing tasks for marks and begin thinking like responsible consultants.

At the beginning, many students still viewed digital marketing mainly through a technical lens, focusing on creating attractive visuals, using trending audio, or applying creative video editing techniques. Their early conversations revolved around aesthetics and viral potential rather than strategic direction. However, once they started speaking directly with business owners,

their perspective gradually shifted. They realised that strategy must come before execution. Before suggesting content ideas, they needed to understand who the target audience was, what made the business different from competitors, and how the brand was currently perceived by customers. They had to consider whether their proposed content aligned with the business identity and long-term goals. Explaining their ideas to SME owners required more than creativity; it demanded clarity, logical reasoning, and confidence in their recommendations.

The advisory nature of the project also encouraged students to conduct more careful observation and analysis. Rather than immediately proposing changes, they first examined the businesses' posting frequency, engagement levels, tone of communication, and visual consistency. Some groups compared competitors' digital presence to identify gaps or opportunities. This analytical stage pushed them to apply theoretical concepts such as segmentation, positioning, and content strategy in a more structured manner. This shift reflects broader discussions that digital and social media marketing education must move beyond technical skill development and emphasise strategic integration and value creation in real contexts (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Working with real entrepreneurs further exposed students to realities that are rarely discussed in textbooks. Some business owners had limited time to focus on digital marketing due to daily operational demands. Others were unfamiliar with platform algorithms or unsure how to interpret engagement metrics. In certain cases, business owners were hesitant to experiment with new approaches because they were comfortable with existing routines. Students therefore had to adjust their recommendations according to these constraints. They learned to simplify marketing terminology, communicate patiently, and offer step-by-step guidance rather than overwhelming suggestions. Instead of presenting idealistic strategies, they began proposing realistic, achievable improvements.

As the weeks progressed, I noticed a visible shift in their discussions and presentation style. Instead of suggesting generic ideas, they began asking more thoughtful and specific questions. They debated among themselves about the suitability of certain platforms for particular target segments. They justified their recommendations using observations and simple data rather than personal preferences. Their confidence improved, especially when they realised that business owners were genuinely listening to their suggestions. Even though they were not directly executing the campaigns, guiding a real business made them feel accountable for the outcomes. That sense of responsibility encouraged deeper thinking and stronger ownership of their learning.

Through this experience, digital marketing gradually became more than just a subject to pass or a collection of tools to master. It became something connected to real livelihoods, real customers, and real consequences. Students began to understand that behind every post, caption, or video lies a broader intention to communicate value, build relationships, and sustain a business. Watching this change unfold reinforced our belief that learning truly expands when students are placed in authentic situations that require them to think critically, adapt to real constraints, and engage meaningfully beyond the classroom walls.

When Teaching Changed Us

While we were observing this transformation in our students, we slowly realised that the experience was also reshaping us as an educator. As they navigated uncertainty, negotiated ideas with business owners and refined their strategies, we found ourselves reflecting on our own assumptions about teaching digital marketing. The SULAM project did not only expand their learning boundaries; it quietly challenged ours as well. Watching them step into advisory roles made us reconsider what it truly means to facilitate learning rather than simply deliver content. It was at this point that we began to recognise that the shift was not happening only within our students, but within us too.

Teaching through SULAM also made us more aware of the emotional dimension of learning. When students shared that business owners appreciated their suggestions or began

implementing small improvements based on their advice, we could see a sense of pride in them. At the same time, we felt a responsibility to ensure that the guidance they provided was thoughtful and ethical as their recommendations could influence real business decisions. This experience required us to listen more, mentor more intentionally and allow students space to think independently rather than depending on direct instructions.

One moment that remains particularly meaningful to us occurred during the SULAM showcase session. Among the five groups, one group decided to go beyond the basic requirement of providing strategic recommendations. Although their role was primarily advisory, they prepared a sample advertisement concept for the SME to help visualise how their strategy could be executed. Their creativity was truly beyond our expectation. The video concept, messaging and overall presentation reflected not only strong technical skills but also a clear understanding of the brand's identity and target audience.

When the group was later announced as the first-place winner for the DGM541 course during the SULAM closing ceremony, it felt like more than just an academic achievement. It was a reflection of their growth; from students who initially questioned their ideas to individuals capable of presenting structured, confident, and creative strategies. Watching them receive the recognition reinforced our belief that when learning extends beyond classroom boundaries, students often discover capabilities they did not realise they possessed. It also reminded us that digital marketing education is not merely about understanding platforms and trends, but about nurturing strategic thinking, creativity and professional confidence.

Challenges Along the Way

While the SULAM experience was meaningful and rewarding, it was not without its challenges. Integrating real businesses into a structured academic timeline introduced a level of unpredictability that could not always be anticipated. Unlike classroom-based assignments where expectations and outcomes are controlled, working with SMEs meant adjusting to their schedules, availability, and operational priorities. Some business owners were highly responsive and enthusiastic, while others took longer to reply due to the demands of running their daily operations. These differences occasionally affected students' momentum and required flexibility in managing deadlines and expectations.

Another challenge emerged within the student groups themselves. Although each group was assigned equal responsibilities, not all members displayed the same level of confidence when communicating with business owners. Some students were comfortable presenting their ideas and leading discussions, while others preferred to remain in the background. Encouraging quieter students to participate more actively required gentle guidance and reassurance. This observation aligns with recent literature suggesting that service-learning initiatives require structured guidance and reflective facilitation to ensure meaningful and balanced student participation (Salam et al., 2019).

There were also instances where students' proposed strategies, though creative and well-structured, did not fully align with the realities faced by the SMEs. Budget limitations, time constraints, and technical skills of the business owners influenced what could realistically be implemented. These moments sometimes led to frustration, particularly when students felt their ideas were strong but not fully adopted. However, such situations became valuable learning experiences. Students began to understand that effective digital marketing is not about imposing ideal solutions, but about adapting strategies to fit practical circumstances. They learned to compromise, simplify, and prioritise.

From our perspective as a lecturer, balancing guidance and independence was another delicate challenge. It was tempting at times to step in and offer direct solutions when students seemed uncertain. However, I had to consciously remind ourselves that the purpose of SULAM was to allow students to navigate complexity and develop their own judgement. Allowing them to experience small setbacks and rethink their strategies was part of the learning process. This required patience and trust in their capability to grow.

Time management was also an ongoing consideration. Coordinating meetings between students and business owners within a six-week period demanded careful planning. Students had to juggle other academic responsibilities, while SMEs operated according to their own schedules. Ensuring that meaningful engagement occurred within a limited timeframe required continuous monitoring and encouragement. These logistical aspects, although less visible in the final presentations, formed a significant part of the learning journey.

Reflecting on these challenges has deepened our appreciation of community-based learning. It reminded us that authentic education is rarely smooth or perfectly structured. Instead, it involves negotiation, adaptation and reflection. The imperfections and uncertainties did not weaken the SULAM experience; rather, they made it more realistic and meaningful. Through these moments, both our students and we learned that growth often happens in situations that are slightly uncomfortable, yet deeply transformative.

Conclusion

The SULAM experience reaffirmed our belief that digital marketing lessons can indeed go beyond the classroom. When students are given the opportunity to engage with real businesses, their learning becomes more intentional, responsible, and reflective. They begin to see digital marketing not merely as a subject to pass, but as a strategic tool that can influence real decisions and real livelihoods.

For us, this experience also reshaped our understanding of teaching. It reminded us that effective education is not solely about delivering content, but about creating spaces where students can explore, question and grow. The classroom does not have to be limited to four walls; it can extend into communities, conversations, and authentic challenges that stimulate deeper thinking.

Ultimately, digital marketing education becomes meaningful when it connects theory with people. Through SULAM, both our students and we experienced learning that was dynamic, collaborative and human. In that sense, the question is no longer whether digital marketing lessons can go beyond the classroom but how often we are willing to allow them to do so.

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