

## THE USE OF THIRD PARTY CERTIFICATIONS IN A DIGITAL MARKETING COURSE

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### Abstract

When developing a new Digital Marketing course, the author decided to use online tools Codecademy and Google Analytics to help students acquire real-world, industry-recognized practical skills. Students commented that their software coding skills improved more in one session than they had over the entire quarter in their MIS course and 33 of the 34 students passed the Google Analytics Individual Qualification (GAIQ) exam. After learning about the students' achievement, an influential business leader expressed interest in hiring one of our students and tweeted his admiration to 18,000 followers.

*"The primary directive of marketing programs in teaching-oriented business schools is the preparation of marketing students to be productive performers in businesses and organizations...A marketing curriculum that prepares students for the jobs available in the marketplace may allow marketing graduates to obtain jobs that actually let them use the knowledge and skills they acquired in marketing classes." (Schlee and Harich, 2010)*

Our students are graduating into a rapidly changing world of marketing. The skills required to be successful in both entry-level jobs and throughout their careers are constantly modifying and multiplying. Unfortunately, many of the skills that students should acquire are taught neither in traditional business schools nor to their future professors in doctoral programs (Teer, Teer and Kruck, 2007). Foremost among the changes in the marketing landscape is the rise of Digital Marketing. Digital Marketing includes, but is not limited to topics such as search engine marketing, content marketing, social media promotion, customer relationship management (CRM), data mining and analytics.

One problem encountered by graduating students in marketing is the disconnect between the topics covered in the typical marketing classes and the skills required by their employers. Generally speaking, business schools emphasize conceptual marketing knowledge, such as the development of marketing plans, management of different marketing functions and product/brand management, while deemphasizing technical job skills such as database analysis, customer relationship management and internet marketing tools (Schlee and Harich, 2010). Compounding this problem, these important technical skills evolve rapidly making course development and execution difficult.

Faculties have attempted to manage this advancing landscape by using real-world applications such as Google AdWords (Neale, et al., 2009), Twitter (Rinaldo, et al., 2013), wikis (Cronin, 2009) and blogging (Kaplan, Piskin and Bol, 2010). While these topics are important there are two factors in which this implementation proves lacking: (1) students are not taught how to refresh their knowledge and (2) students are not given the opportunity to obtain professionally recognized certification that can assist them in the competitive job market.

Fortunately, for students and professors there are tools on the web that can be incorporated into Digital Marketing curricula that can overcome these problems. Specifically, the Google Analytics Individual Qualification exam (GAIQ) and Codecademy.com allow professors to provide valuable technical marketing skills to their students. Integrating these modules into a Digital Marketing course can lead to improved learning, course evaluations and job prospects.

## Introduction

In the winter quarter of 2013, I first taught the Digital Marketing course. My aims for the course were twofold. First, I wanted to educate my students in the many different ways that the Internet and digital technology were impacting the field of marketing. Second, I wanted to give my students specific, industry-recognized skills that they would be able to put on their resume and aid them in their search for post-graduation employment. There was somewhat of a learning curve that first quarter, but I made changes to the syllabus and course management for the Spring Quarter that resulted in significant student achievement regarding the ability to code using the programming languages HTML, CSS and Javascript as well as the certification of 97% of students in Google Analytics.

## Description and Learning Objectives

To be successful in the field of marketing, one must be able to wear many hats. A software programmer who can create a home page as well as clean up the back-end infrastructure is known as a “Full-Stack Programmer” (Foster 2013). Particularly in today’s fast-moving start-up world, marketers must do more than just come up with clever taglines. Marketers must be technologists, data scientists, segmenters, and strategists. With that in mind, my goal was to create “Full-Stack Marketers” from the graduates of the Digital Marketing class.

In particular, I wanted my students to achieve a greater understanding of the technical skills associated with digital marketing, such as software coding and data analysis. According to Schlee and Harich (2010), 35.1% of entry level marketing jobs require analytic skills, while in Seattle (where most of the students are likely to seek employment) 52% of marketing job require internet marketing tools and 50% require analytic or software skills.

It was not important to me for them to become experts, but it was important that they appreciate both the value that increased skills would give them on the job market as well as the tools available to them through the web to learn those skills.

Additionally, after consulting with industry practitioners, including Chief Digital Officer of Starbucks Corp. Adam Brotman and former Director of Business Development for MOZ.com and WWU alumnus Andrew Dumont, I decided that strongly encouraging my students to take the time to study and take the Google Analytics Individual Qualification (GAIQ) exam as well as take several modules of Codeacademy.com would give them the opportunity to send a signal to companies that they were serious candidates for employment.

## Assessment Methods and Results

The coding and GAIQ teaching modules differed somewhat in that I taught coding as a stand-alone session, while the GAIQ portion of the course was ongoing throughout the quarter.

To introduce coding, the students downloaded the free textbook [Introduction to Computing: Explorations in Language, Logic and Machines](#) by David Evans and read chapter 1 which covers the concepts of processes, procedures, power, binary code<sup>1</sup>, bits, bytes, Moore’s Law and computer science as a practical and liberal art. After reading the chapter I asked them to visit and register for Code Academy, a free online resource that teaches software coding from HTML to Python to APIs. I asked each student to spend two hours on the site and then post a screenshot of his or her progress on his or her personal Digital Marketing course blog. Most students got through the lessons covering HTML and CSS, some were able to learn about

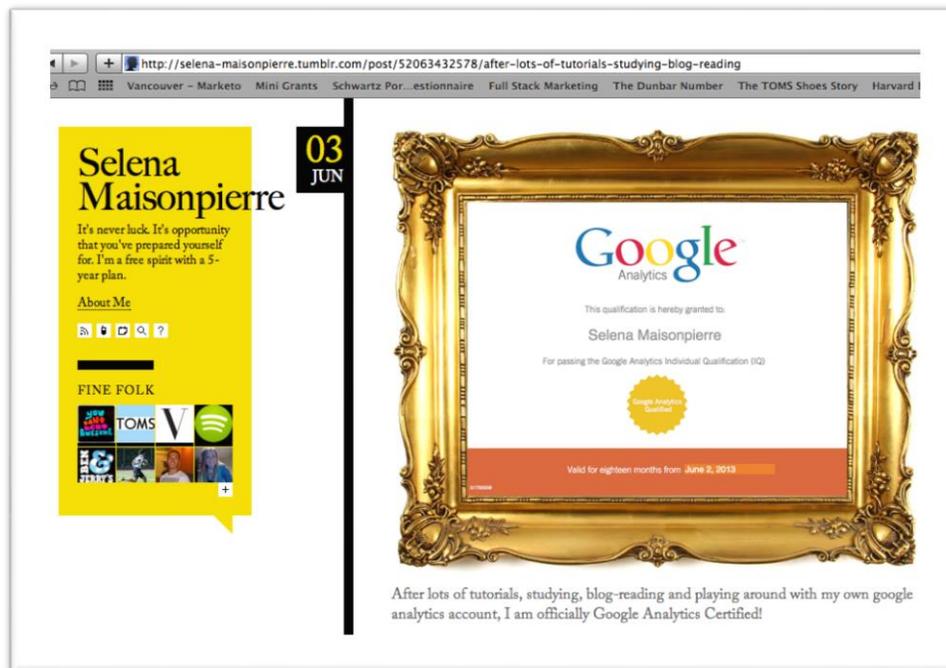
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<sup>1</sup> I told this joke in class, “There are 10 types of people in the world. Those that know binary code and those that don’t.”

Javascript, and all were amazed at how uncomplicated the process of learning programming could be. Many subsequently put their Codecademy knowledge on their resumes in the education section, directly beneath WWU.

On the other hand, Google Analytics, was something that we discussed every day in class, as we prepared together for the certification test. Google Analytics allows users to access data about their website's traffic, sales and conversions with real-time reporting, custom reports, advanced segmentation and dashboards for Key Performance Indicators (KPI). As I mentioned earlier, all students were required to create a blog where they would discuss the topics covered in class and during the second session, a member of our college's IT staff helped the students install the Google Analytics tracking code. This allowed the students to practice their GA skills while they reviewed the lessons.

There are approximately 14 Google Analytics IQ lessons and each day in class we would review one of them. As we approached the end of the quarter, I decided to up the stakes. Knowing how valuable passing the GAIQ test could be for the students I said that any student that passed the exam would get an "A" on the final exam. While I was concerned that by not requiring the final might encourage some students to ignore other important lessons of the class, each student was required to write on their personal blog about each day's topic which allowed me to confirm their work and comprehension. I am proud to say that 33 of my 34 students passed and many of the students posted their certification certificate on their personal blogs and LinkedIn profiles.



### External Recognition

One of the most influential executives in Digital Marketing is Wil Reynolds, the founder of SEER interactive in Philadelphia. On May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013, Wil tweeted to his 18,000 followers that he had some free time and that he would be happy to review any resumes. Coincidentally, one of my Digital Marketing students asked me that day if I would look at his resume. I asked the student if it would be okay for me to share his resume with Wil and he said that would be fine. This is the reply I received from Wil after sending him the student's resume.

Hey Mark, I must say I really like this one!!! Sounds like a guy I could use at SEER! :)

1. I like the format, it's not typical, and it looks nice.
2. The description of himself is also atypical, but is succinct, and well written in a short concise way.
3. I'm not sure if I care as much about the courses he has taken personally, so that is up to him if he wants to include it, I just don't think it adds a ton of value, unless they apply directly to the job he is applying for.
4. **LOVE seeing codeacademy on there, shows a desire to learn something on his own, smart addition. (emphasis added)**
5. On his work at womp, I'd like more detail, maybe some performance metrics on SEO or on how his blog posts performed vs the trend. If he did cold calling, I'd like to see what revenue amount he closed, same on the doggy haven, he should get a little more numbers based, how many employees did he supervise, close out reports are vague, what was in them, what was his real responsibility with them is what I'd be seeking. Saying he "perfected" CRM is a little out there for me, as so often nothing is "perfected" in he software world.
6. **Just like codeacademy, love the Google Cert (emphasis added)**

That is all, seems like a great kid.

Wil Reynolds became a resource for me to bounce ideas off of regarding the course. When I informed him that 33 of the 34 students passed the GAIQ test, he tweeted this to his followers.<sup>2</sup>



### Discussion

The qualitative comments from the student evaluations indicate a high level of satisfaction with the practical skills acquired in the class.

- *“Loved this class. All the information covered was very valuable.”*
- *“I want Mark to know: I went to a job interview and the class was extremely helpful. At one point the interviewer put computer terms on the white board and asked me what words I knew. I knew most of them because of this class.”*
- *“This was the best class I have taken at Western and literally got me a job. Can't thank Dr. Staton enough.”*

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<sup>2</sup> In the 140 character space of Twitter “TY TY” translates to “Thank You, Thank You”.

Additionally, the quantitative section of the student evaluations included multiple mean responses of 5.0 out of a 1 to 5 Likert scale, showing high appreciation for the topics covered.

A data analysis of the popular online social networking site LinkedIn illustrates the values of these type of external certification for job seekers.

<u>Skill</u>	# of LinkedIn hits <sup>3</sup>
“HTML”	8,442
“Javascript”	8,087
“CSS”	5,572
“Google Analytics”	2,125

Beyond Google Analytics and Codecademy, there are many other online certification programs, including DistilledU (for Search Engine Optimization) Moz Academy (for inbound marketing and Hootsuite University (for social media). Hootsuite University, in particular can be a key resource, as it offers both an industry-recognized certification as well as constantly updated content that can be used in a class to teach social media. This year, I plan to have students continue working with Codecademy and Google Analytics as well as include a certification course with HootSuite.

It is often said in Computer Science degree programs, that the skills they teach their students will be out of date within five years of the students’ graduation. The mark of a successful CS education is teaching not only the most important concepts, but also how the students can teach themselves when new platforms are released. Due to the rapidly changing marketing landscape, our world is becoming more like that of the Computer Science faculty and as professors we need to develop teaching platforms that not only teach the core strategic marketing theories, but also allow students then to teach themselves the most up-to-date tactical skills after graduation.

### **Limitations / Future Research**

As this is a new course, with few students having taken the course and graduated, the data regarding post-graduation effectiveness is relatively anecdotal. Additional data will be collected in upcoming academic terms to measure both student improvement over the length of the course, as well as the value of topics on subsequent post-graduation hiring and success within one’s job.

References Available upon Request

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<sup>3</sup> As of September, 2013