

*Enhancing Tacit Knowledge Acquisition in Advertising Design Through
Case-Based Learning*

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The Korean Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Design disciplines contain a range of tacit knowledge that is difficult to articulate and deliver, such as the professional practices in the advertising design field. The research examined the acquisition of tacit knowledge among advertising design students, focusing on the challenges of articulating and transmitting professional practices within the industry. The research seeks to improve students' understanding of advertising design professions and practices by utilizing Case-based Learning theory. A qualitative methodology was adopted, utilizing observations, documentation, and interviews for data collection. The study comprised 37 fourth-year advertising design students who conducted case studies with industry professionals on the theme of professionalism. The collected research data include class syllabi, pedagogical documentation, semester-long observation notes, participant-initiated case studies, project reports, and interview transcripts with the participants. The research seeks to enhance instructional strategies for facilitating tacit knowledge acquisition through Case-based Learning, identifying key elements and effective methodologies associated with this approach. The results are anticipated to provide valuable insights and recommendations for educators regarding the effective instruction of tacit knowledge using Case-based Learning. By comprehending the elements that facilitate the acquisition of tacit knowledge through this method, educators can enhance their ability to provide impactful education in advertising design. This study enriches the broader understanding of tacit knowledge transmission in design education and offers practical implications for developing curriculum and pedagogies that could be extended to other relevant fields.

Keywords: Case-Based Learning (CBL), Design Education, Tacit Knowledge, Professional Practice, Advertising Design

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Introduction

A key component of preparing students for professional practice in design education is tacit knowledge, especially in advertising design. Tacit knowledge encompasses skills such as intuitive decision-making, creative problem-solving, client relationship management, and the ability to navigate the fast-paced, collaborative nature of the industry (Kaptan, 2013; Faulconbridge, 2006). These competencies are crucial for students to transition from academic settings to the professional world. However, tacit knowledge is inherently difficult to teach (Raghuram, 1996) because it is experiential, context-specific, and often transmitted informally through mentorship and hands-on experience (Eraut, 2000).

Despite its significance, tacit knowledge remains challenging to convey through traditional pedagogical methods, which primarily focus on explicit knowledge—concepts and techniques that can be easily taught (Hélie & Sun, 2010). This challenge is particularly evident in advertising design education, where students must not only learn technical skills but also develop insights into industry practices and professional norms that cannot be fully captured in textbooks or lectures. Consequently, educators must explore innovative approaches to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world practice.

One promising strategy to facilitate the acquisition of tacit knowledge is Case-based Learning (CBL). CBL exposes students to real-world case studies (Kantar & Massouh, 2015), allowing them to engage with complex, context-rich problems that professionals encounter (Thistlewaite et al., 2012). By analyzing and discussing these industry cases, students gain a deeper understanding of the tacit aspects of the profession—skills and insights that are often left unspoken in traditional educational settings (Polanyi, 1962). CBL also enhances critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills (Pinzur, 2019; Popil, 2011), which are essential for success in the advertising design industry.

Although CBL has been explored in various fields, like nursing and healthcare professions (Li, Ye & Chen, 2019; Hong & Yu, 2017; Bi et al., 2019), its application in advertising design education, particularly in relation to tacit knowledge acquisition, has received limited attention. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how CBL supports tacit knowledge acquisition among advertising design students. It will explore how professional practice cases can improve students' understanding of industry practices and identify the key elements of effective CBL methodologies that can be integrated into advertising design curricula.

The study specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Case-based Learning (CBL) support the acquisition of tacit knowledge in advertising design education?
2. What role do professional practice cases play in enhancing students' understanding of the advertising industry and the complex skills required for success in the field?

This research contributes to the understanding of tacit knowledge transmission in design education by examining the effectiveness of CBL in fostering students' professional development. It will offer practical implications for curriculum development and teaching strategies, which may also be applicable to other design disciplines and professional fields.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the acquisition of tacit knowledge through Case-based Learning (CBL) in advertising design education. The qualitative approach was selected for its ability to provide in-depth insights into students' experiences, which are subjective and context-dependent—qualities that align with tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, by nature, is experiential, intuitive, and difficult to articulate (Crause O'Brien, 1995). Therefore, qualitative methods, including observations, documentation analysis, and semi-structured interviews, were used to capture the complexity and richness of the learning process. This design enabled the investigation of how CBL contributes to tacit knowledge acquisition and how professional practices are integrated into students' learning experiences.

Participants

The study involved 37 fourth-year advertising design students from a university in Hong Kong who participated in a course focused on professionalism in the advertising industry. The course was structured around a comprehensive Case-based Learning (CBL) approach, drawing on models proposed by Kulak and Newton (2014) to enhance the students' ability to apply CBL principles in a real-world context. The workload for these students included a combination of traditional lectures, small case investigations, and group discussions, all aimed at developing a foundational understanding of professionalism in advertising design.

A significant component of the course required students to engage directly with industry professionals, interviewing them about a published advertising campaign. This hands-on activity allowed students to explore the decision-making processes and challenges faced by professionals in the field. After gathering insights, students were tasked with creating detailed case studies and presenting their analyses to the class. This structure fostered critical thinking, collaboration, and the application of theoretical knowledge to real-world advertising situations.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection for this study combined three key methods: observations, documentation analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

Observations were conducted over the course of one semester during CBL sessions. The researcher focused on student engagement with case studies and industry professionals, examining how students applied theoretical knowledge to real-world problems, engaged in collaborative activities, and demonstrated problem-solving skills. Both verbal and non-verbal interactions, including group discussions and student-professional exchanges, were recorded to capture the tacit knowledge transfer occurring through active participation.

Documentation analysis involved reviewing course syllabi, pedagogical resources, and student project reports. These materials helped understand the structure of the CBL activities, the learning objectives, and how tacit knowledge was integrated into the curriculum. Project reports reflected students' application of tacit knowledge, providing insights into how they translated academic learning into practical skills.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students. Student interviews explored their perceptions of CBL, how it enhanced their understanding of the advertising profession, and the challenges they faced in acquiring tacit knowledge. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify key themes related to tacit knowledge acquisition and industry practices.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves several key steps. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and project reports to identify initial patterns and emerging themes related to tacit knowledge acquisition and Case-based Learning (CBL). A coding framework was then developed based on the research questions and key areas of interest, including tacit knowledge, professional practice integration, and CBL methodologies, with each data point systematically coded for recurring themes such as “problem-solving,” “creative decision-making,” “collaboration,” and “real-world application.”

The coded data were subsequently categorized into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives, such as industry insight, student engagement, and professional preparedness. These categories facilitated a clearer understanding of how students gained tacit knowledge and applied it in solving real-world problems. The researcher then identified overarching patterns within the data and linked them to existing literature on tacit knowledge and CBL, interpreting how these findings highlighted the transfer of tacit knowledge and the influence of professional case studies on students' skill development. To ensure the validity of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing and cross-checking insights from observations, documentation, and interviews, which helped confirm the consistency of the emerging themes. Additionally, member checking was conducted, where a subset of participants reviewed the preliminary findings to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretation. This process provided a comprehensive and validated understanding of the students' learning experiences.

Findings and Discussions

To address the research questions and discuss the findings, this section presents the results obtained from semi-structured interviews with students, focusing on their learning experiences of tacit knowledge acquisition about professional practices in advertising industry they encountered with the CBL pedagogy.

From Theory to Real-World Industry Practices

The goal of CBL is to “prepare students for clinical practice, through the use of authentic clinical cases. It links theory to practice, through the application of knowledge to the cases, using inquiry-based learning method. (Thistlewaite et al., 2012, p. e422)” CBL enables students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by engaging them in authentic, real-world problem-solving scenarios. In relation to practical application of concepts in advertising industry, students reported that analyzing and replicating industry-specific decision-making processes deepened their intuitive understanding of advertising strategies. Through interviewing the practitioners and analyzing the real cases, students realized every decision had its own meaning from a commercial point of view but not personal aesthetic or will, as indicated in the following excerpts:

“An eye-catching and impactful idea is great, but when it comes to solving problems, it might actually be a very limited approach.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

“Before taking this course, I really didn’t know how much importance the advertising industry places on awards. It turns out there are cases created specifically to win awards.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

In addition to bridging the gap between theory and practice, students also learned how to apply the knowledge they gained in class to real-world cases. By working on industry-specific cases, students gained a deeper understanding of how certain concepts play out in the advertising world. They realized that many of the strategies and principles they learned in class were not abstract ideals, but tangible tools used to address actual industry challenges. The real-world cases provided them with valuable content to reflect on and integrate into their learning, allowing them to anticipate the outcomes and consequences of their decisions in a practical context (Gonzalez, Fagerström & Fagernes, 2017). Students acknowledged that these cases helped them recognize that many situations in the industry unfold in predictable ways, reinforcing the importance of applying learned complex knowledge in realistic scenarios. This real-world perspective not only made the learning process more relevant but also enhanced their ability to think critically and strategically, as shown in their reflections on industry practices.

Environment for Collaboration and Reflection

The CBL approach fosters a collaborative and reflective learning environment that is instrumental in helping students acquire tacit knowledge, particularly regarding professional practices in the advertising industry. Group discussions and peer feedback during CBL sessions facilitated the sharing of implicit ideas, leading to greater clarity and refinement of creative and professional skills, as indicated in the following excerpts:

“When we were discussing and drafting the presentation script, we actually referred to the framework taught by the teacher to guide us: ‘Is this professional?’ Or, ‘Which part of the creative director’s previous experience does this belong to?’ We had discussions together and shared our opinions.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

“We each had our own roles—you handled this part, they handled that part. For the script, everyone would review it together and then develop the flow of the presentation. Then, whoever was good at writing would work together to refine it further.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

Collaboration was integral to the learning process, as students worked in groups to analyze real-world cases, share perspectives, and collectively develop solutions to industry challenges. These group dynamics enabled students to exchange implicit insights and build on each other's ideas, simulating the collaborative nature of professional advertising teams. Mezghani, Exposit & Drira (2016) implied that collaborative environments help in formalizing and sharing tacit knowledge by creating a common conceptual framework and documenting expert knowledge, which can be reused and shared. Working in teams allows individuals to actively engage with each other, facilitating the exchange of tacit knowledge through direct interaction and shared experiences (Koskinen, Pihlanto & Vanharanta, 2003).

Reflection was equally important, as students were encouraged to critically evaluate their experiences and the decisions made by industry professionals in the CBL. By engaging in reflective discussions and preparing detailed case analyses, students were able to internalize the nuances of professional practices, such as balancing creativity with commercial objectives, addressing client needs, and navigating complex decision-making processes. This dual emphasis on collaboration and reflection created a holistic learning experience, allowing students to not only observe professional behaviors but also to articulate and embody these practices in their own work, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

“I think professionalism is, as I mentioned earlier, what the creative director said: being accountable to the client and to yourself. This definition has already been ingrained in my mind. ... I’ve done some freelance work helping others shoot videos, and if part of the video didn’t turn out well, I used to hope they wouldn’t credit my name. But after the interview, I no longer want to have that mindset. I want to put my best effort into everything I do. I want to change my thinking so that if I’ve done my part and they don’t credit my name, I’d feel like confronting them about it.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

Reflection allows learners to internalize and make sense of experiences that are often intuitive and unarticulated (ref). Through reflective practices, students can critically evaluate their actions, decisions, and outcomes, linking theoretical concepts to real-world applications. In the context of professional education, reflection enables learners to analyze the reasoning behind industry practices, uncovering the implicit thought processes and judgments that drive successful outcomes (Ravanel Moreno et al., 2021). By revisiting their own experiences and the feedback from peers or mentors, students can identify patterns, refine their approaches, and develop a deeper understanding of the unspoken norms and standards of their field (Hasenstab & Pietzonka, 2019). This iterative process not only enhances their ability to adapt and respond in complex situations but also solidifies their professional identity by fostering self-awareness and confidence in applying tacit knowledge effectively.

Inspiration and Engagement Towards Career Development

Students expressed heightened motivation and a stronger connection to the profession when working on authentic case studies, which were perceived as highly relevant to their future careers. The real-world nature of CBL provided them with a glimpse into the realities of the advertising industry, inspiring them to envision their own professional growth. Engaging with real-world scenarios and professionals gave students a sense of purpose and direction, motivating them to actively participate and reflect on their potential roles in the field. For many students, interacting with seasoned industry professionals served as both an inspiration and a benchmark for their own development. The exposure to professional practices not only instilled a deeper respect for the industry but also encouraged students to take ownership of their learning journey, as one student remarked:

“Even though we interviewed this creative director and learned about their professionalism and how they present it, in reality, when we step into society, we will still need to gradually develop our own understanding of professionalism step by step.” (Excerpt from students’ interview)

While the CBL course design on advertising professionalism did not resonate with all students, it nonetheless inspired deep reflection on their careers. Despite their initial

dissatisfaction, one student acknowledged that the course prompted them to reassess their self-perception, career readiness, and the broader meaning of professionalism, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

“(When asking about professionalism) I think like this: I often question whether I am qualified to do something, but I don't feel that I need to become a 'professional' to do it. If I have the skills, the ability, and believe I can handle it, then I would consider myself a qualified advertising professional. ... If we have the ability to criticize others, how do we view ourselves first? Those people are seasoned professionals in the advertising industry, and what they do might actually be more appropriate and correct than what we think. I don't think we're in a position yet to criticize whether what they do is right or wrong.” (Excerpt from students' interview)

CBL has emerged as a pedagogical approach that effectively cultivates both inspiration and engagement in students, particularly in their preparation for professional careers. By immersing students in authentic, real-world scenarios, CBL aligns with constructivist learning theories, encouraging active participation and fostering self-regulation and autonomy in the learning process (Anthony, 1996). Provided with an experiential learning approach enables students to engage in reflective practices that are crucial for the acquisition of tacit knowledge (Bijleveld & Dorée, 2014), which is often implicit and context-dependent. Reflection, a core component of experiential learning theory (Morris, 2020), allows students to critically evaluate their own qualifications and envision pathways for future professional growth, asking questions such as, “Am I qualified” and “What strategies can I employ to become qualified?”

Moreover, CBL provides a platform for students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, fostering a deeper understanding of professional standards and expectations. This alignment between academic learning and industry practices supports career readiness by prompting students to actively plan their professional development and engage in metacognitive processes. This echoes with the research by Sitzmann & Ely (2011), self-regulation and goal-planning are key elements in learning work-related knowledge and skills. By integrating CBL into curricula, educators can cultivate a learning environment that not only inspires students but also equips them with the critical skills and reflective mindset necessary for navigating complex and dynamic career landscapes.

Conclusion

This research illustrates the efficacy of Case-based Learning (CBL) in facilitating tacit knowledge acquisition within advertising design education. Through interaction with genuine industry examples, students connected theoretical principles with practical application, enhancing their comprehension of professional judgment, strategic decision-making, and industry-specific standards. CBL's inquiry-based methodology, along with experiential learning theories, created a dynamic setting for students to assimilate implicit knowledge typically unattainable through conventional teaching methods. Moreover, collaborative activities facilitated peer-to-peer learning and simulated real-world teamwork, thereby reinforcing the acquisition of skills vital for success in the advertising industry.

CBL prompted students to engage in critical reflection regarding their career growth, fostering self-regulation and a proactive perspective toward their professional responsibilities.

Students examined their qualifications and pathways to becoming proficient practitioners through authentic scenarios, promoting metacognitive development. The study emphasizes the educational significance of CBL; yet, its drawbacks involve reliance on qualitative data from a singular cohort, thus constraining generalizability. Future research ought to investigate longitudinal and quantitative methodologies to evaluate the enduring effects of CBL on career preparedness. Nevertheless, the results confirm that CBL is an effective instrument for connecting academic learning with industry standards, providing students with the reflective mentality and practical abilities essential for navigating intricate job environments.

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