

The Media Battle

A creative pressure-cooker for connecting to the professional field

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Abstract

The Media Battle is a concept for a competitive one-week pressure-cooker contest, in which students develop a creative product for companies or other organisations. It brings together education, research and professional practice, with benefits for all parties involved. We guide participating organisations to develop a detailed problem description ensuring that descriptions are sufficiently clear and focused for students to work on during a week. Students spend the week developing their concept such that it can be pitched to their client organisation. Students are trained in pitching and are coached in developing creative concepts. Several groups have the same client. On the last day, clients select their favourite concept, while a jury selects a winner among the concepts of different clients. Most concepts are further developed in ‘regular courses’, while some concepts, usually the winning ones, are subject further developed in the curriculum. In this article we will describe our experiences with media battles and discuss critical success and failure factors..

Introduction

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Universities of Applied Sciences should provide experiences that are important for the professional career: having to deal with problems without a well-defined subject, communication with people of different backgrounds, and working with real life impact under tight deadlines. The educational value of such experiences are stressed in constructivist approaches like the situated learning environments, where students learn in authentic contexts (Brown, 1989; van Merriënboer, 2001). They cannot always be provided within the regular curriculum, however. The Media Battle is a concept that does provide such professional experiences. In this paper we explain the Media Battle concept and its educational value. Moreover we position it as a bridge between education, the professional field and research (Figure 1).

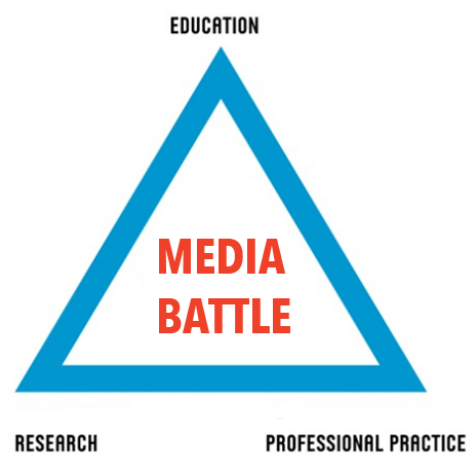


Figure 1: relation between education research and the professional field in the Media Battle


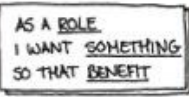








Description of a Media Battle

The Media Battle is a competitive one-week pressure-cooker contest, in which students develop a creative product for companies or other organisations. The media battle is set up like a challenge between competing teams. In our battles, students develop concepts in the field of communication, marketing and design, which reflects our faculty. Students are coached and supervised by educators and (if budget allows) creative professionals. External organisations propose practical problems to multidisciplinary student teams from different faculties and/or universities and brief students that will work on their problem afterwards. Most of the time, they spend working and brainstorming in multidisciplinary teams on a location, which has been transformed into a creative studio away from their usual classrooms (Figure 2). We moved students away from their usual classroom environment to create a more stimulating and creative environment, and to avoid students being “distracted” by their usual lessons and activities.



Figure 2: Students working in the creative studio

After the briefing, students have one week to come up with a solution (Figure 3). During the week, students work in groups of 5 to 8 according to a structured design process. They get special inspiration lectures from domain experts or creative professionals. Students are provided with information from different sources, ranging from traditional documentation and expert feedback to social media to contact target groups. At pre-defined moments students upload deliverables to make them available for commissioners, coaches and the organisation. Input from teachers and creative professionals proved vital: it speeds up the brainstorm process by giving inspiring examples to look at and by asking relevant questions (often simply why students believed their concept would be attractive and would work), as well as breaking deadlock in student groups that could not come to agreement among themselves.

	monday	tuesday	wednesday	thursday	friday
morning	Kick off: Crossmedial communication and Influencing behaviour, Briefing 	Creative studio: Look-think-imagine-create, Persona, User journeys, Mind maps...  User stories (prioritise)	Creative studio: Feedback  Concept description	Creative studio: Prepare presentation, detailed design 	Grand final  Winner!
afternoon	Creative studio: Research: target group, sender, objectives & needs, media...  Debrief (mail to case owner)	Creative studio: Ideation, from Idea to Concept...  Proposition	Creative studio: Storyboards, 6-up, visual design, mood boards....  6-up Sketch board	Creative studio: Pitch training Pitch practice  Presentation Creative rational	Party lunch! 

Bold = deliverables to be uploaded to Media Battle content management system; please use provided templates.

Figure 3: An example schedule of a Media Battle

Good communication with available teachers and professionals also gives students an edge in the competition. Every commissioner chooses a winning concept from the teams working on their challenge, and the winners then pitches to an independent jury for an overall winner in a Dragons Den setting.

Process

The process of the Media Battle can be divided in four main stages: design, preparation, the pressure cooker week itself, and a follow up.

During the design and definition phase, the subject of the battle, the date and the key external partners are determined. In our experience, this phase was restricted by external factors like projects we were working on. For a successful outcome, it is important to clearly define objectives and set criteria for success.

The preparation phase requires most of the organisation. It involves ensuring that students can participate in the battle by consulting with other educators, involving external commissioning partners, organising a location and catering, determining the detailed program and finding funding. Helping external partners formulating their business case a particularly important task. We did sessions with the Media Strategy Game (van Vliet et al. 2013 these proceedings, www.mediastrategiespel.nl) to help partners decide on their strategic needs and their tactical approach, leaving freedom for the implementation and media choice for the students.

During the battle week itself, organisers make sure that professionals are received, infrastructure is working, student questions are answered, educators are guided to the right groups and catering (coffee!) is delivered.

During the follow up phase further cooperation with commissioning partners is discussed. In particular, we ask whether they are interested in working out some of the concepts, including but not restricted to the winning one. Often partners see valuable elements in several proposals and would like to elaborate on some combination. Different options are discussed, like having concepts developed further by students in the regular curriculum or prototyping and testing the concept.

Related concepts

Organising a challenge for students to come up with solutions for companies or organisations is not new. Such events have been organised in various contexts ranging from ‘come up with a new name for our local community center’ to ‘invent a solution for traffic jams’.

In 2010, the global design firm IDEO launched “openIDEO” (<http://www.openideo.com>), a platform for collaboration between creative thinkers. It has realised some of the concepts itself and licenses all concepts similar to the creative commons for anyone to pick up. The Talent Agency/World (tta-world.com) organises various global online battles aimed at talents from University, on energy <http://tta-world.com/projects/5/challenge-the-world-of/> and healthcare (www.healthbattle.nl). Companies compose their team from a pool of applicants. Other battles are locally oriented with a real life battle component similar to ours (tta-world.com/projects/2/nrg-battle-europe-edition/) and serve a more educational purpose. The Battle of Concepts (www.battleofconcepts.nl) is an initiative launched In 2007, that supports Dutch companies by challenging students and young professionals to post their ideas, and pre-selects the best ones. An other Dutch example is Students in Motion, a project week for first-year students organized by the school of Design and Communication (HvA) in Amsterdam (www.studentsinmotion.nl). We first ran The Media Battle as part of the Creative Xcellerator project in 2008/2009. In 2010 the event was incorporated in the ‘Crossmedia Atelier’ project which we partnered with Saxion university of applied sciences in Enschede. In recent years both

Saxion and HU have further developed the Media Battle e.g. in the “Centrum Ondernemers” and the “Museum Kompas” project.

Benefits

The Media Battle requires a significant investment in time and money to organize. It is therefore important that the value of the battle is sufficiently clear.

Educational Value

The Media Battle creates a situated learning environment, in which students focus on real-world, complex problems. The authentic context resembles a realistic work setting, which students will encounter in their future career. This constructivist approach is based on the didactic principle, that students should be activated to construct their own knowledge, in line with experience and expertise they already possess (Kanselaar, 2006). Cooperation with peers in multidisciplinary teams plays an important role in this process, because it involves students by sharing viewpoints and explaining ideas (Van der Linden, et al in Volman, 2006). This helps creativity by stimulating discussion between students and exposing different points of view (Figure 4). According to Van Merriënboer (2001), the environment should be rich in information and there are no right answers. The Media Battle gives an opportunity for students to get into with research and researchers. The Media Battle fits in his “holistic viewpoint” in which students should be challenged and guided in dealing with the complexity of whole-task performance. The problem can be approached in various ways, thus addressing different learning styles (Kolb, 1984): the “theorist” may start doing desk research on the target group, whereas the “observer” may immediately leave the studio to observe the target group him or herself.



Figure 4: Students explaining to peers and teachers

The competitive aspect of the media battle turns out to be highly motivating for many students. They put noticeable effort in an attempt to win, and describe it as “part of the fun”. Making a potential real life impact is also an important motivating factor for students. The fact that their

solution might be selected for further implementation was regarded more rewarding than the shiny trophy that awaited them at the end of the week.

Professional Value

The primary value of the Media Battle for companies and other organisations is that it is a low risk, cheap playground for business cases. Moreover, they are guided to think these business cases through. It gives an opportunity to get input from young people with fresh ideas, that may not be available in the organisation. It also provides an opportunity to get hands on experience with high potentials among students. Furthermore, it gives professionals and researchers a chance to connect and exchange experiences as well as state of the art knowledge on the subject matter.

Research Value

For the applied researcher the battle provides an opportunity to get in contact with organisations and companies for collaboration, work on developing new concepts and show the value of their research. It gives researchers the opportunity to meet students interested in doing research, Moreover the process of formulating a problem provides insight in the blind spots in the professional field.

Costs

For the organising party, the main cost of the Media Battle is the significant time investment of organising the event and coaching students. In addition, hiring professionals and renting a location, is a significant monetary cost. In our experience organizing a battle costs on the order of 220 man hours of preparation for a battle with 100 students. The main time sinks are negotiating internally with educational management, finding and communicating with partners, and helping partners formulate an assignment. Finding a proper location and local infrastructure (catering, internet, etc) can also take a surprising amount of time. During the battle week about 8 people were working full time, including researchers and teachers. About half the teachers were freed from regular classes because of the battle.

For commissioning partners, the main costs are the time needed to communicate with the organisation and formulating the assignment. During the battle week a time investment is needed for briefing and coaching the students and evaluating their ideas. Organisations interested in a follow up, had to put in a significant amount of work coaching students after the battle week.

We also had our researchers investing in documenting some of the results of the battle and the rationale from the commissioning organisation

(<http://www.museumkompas.nl/casusbeschrijvingen/>). This turned out to be quite time consuming.

Organisational Issues

Like every big project, the Media Battle has some weak spots. Below we give a SWOT analysis of crucial factors. First we want to discuss three crucial success factors: collaboration, alignment with the educational process, and management of expectations.

Collaboration

Motivation and full commitment of the partners, both internal and external, is crucial for the success of the Media Battle. External partners include the commissioners and the creative professionals coaching student teams and giving lectures. The commissioners are therefore involved from the very beginning long before the actual battle, if possible formalised by a contract.

The success of a battle greatly depends on the formulation of the challenges. A good formulation provides students with a clear understanding of expectations and gives more handles on a problem. Almost invariably we found that a better formulated challenge also forced organisations to think through the business case themselves. It also facilitates a follow up, because the investment in formulating the challenge naturally leads to interest in the result of the battle. For supporting professionals, motivation usually means having an interest in working with students, being interested in the subject or being properly paid. Students appreciate being coached by professionals as it makes them feel important and provides them different perspective. Whether such professionals are successful, however, greatly depends on the way they are briefed.

Alignment with the educational program

There is a marked difference between an intra- and extra-curricular approach with a direct impact on the quality and quantity of the output of the battle. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. The intra-curricular approach has the advantage that one can integrate part of the curricular program as part of the battle, and that it inherits the mandatory character of the regular curriculum which increases participation. However, this implies that both the motivated, strong students and the weak, unmotivated ones participate.

An extra-curricular approach means that students take the initiative to apply themselves. We find that most such students apply based on personal interest, and tend to be stronger overall. Despite their personal motivation students can drop out at the last moment, especially when application is free. The usual reason is curricular obligations: students motivated for a battle tend to be motivated overall. In an extra-curricular approach it is therefore important to decide on a reasonable selection strategy (demonstrated excellence, letters of motivation and/or recommendation, willingness to pay a registration fee etc.)

Expectation Management

It is important to discuss expectations and commitment with all parties involved during the preparation phase. There is a risk that expectations of the creativity, motivation and ability to come up with ideas of students become overly rosy. There is also a risk of expectations being too low, but this is easier to manage by stimulating a more demanding challenge. Both problems have the same source: unfamiliarity. While commissioning partners like the idea of students working for them, they often don't realise that high quality results requires their own time and effort to give feedback. The longer-term commitment and time investment for a follow up is usually even more problematic. Thus, it is necessary to come to agreement prior to the battle itself.

SWOT

Strengths Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Students experience working full focus on one case.● Students work on real cases and get in touch with real clients.● Students learn to work in multidisciplinary teams● Students externally motivated by competition Professional field <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Getting access to fresh ideas from a young target group.● Meeting talented students● Getting inspiration from research insights● Testing business cases low budget, low risk Research <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Possibility to show value of research● Direct exchange between research and education● Input from professional field● Possibility to vary scale, theme and set up according to research focus.	Opportunities Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Getting inspired by state of the art research insights● Feeding student's creativity Professional field <ul style="list-style-type: none">● New business opportunities● Networking opportunity Research <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Opportunity for Pilots or test cases● Opportunity to start new research projects with battle contacts as partners● Opportunity to recognise talented students interested in participating in research
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<p>Weakness</p> <p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expensive: requires big investment in time and money ● Interferes with regular curriculum <p>Professional field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uncertain outcomes ● Requires going public with business case ● Requires Non trivial time investment of staff. ● Schedule fixed by curriculum <p>Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Significant time investment ● Dependence on external partners, educators, and students ● Uncertain outcomes 	<p>Threats</p> <p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Media Battle overload ● Unmotivated students ● Follow up in class room lacks or starts from scratch. ● Inflexibility of curricula/ educational managers ● Companies seeing students as cheap labour. ● Teachers that see battle as somebody else's responsibility ● External partners that cancel at the last moment ● Insufficiently well formulated business case <p>Professional field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Insufficient coaching of the process ● Conflicting interests with education/ research ● Unrealistic or uninteresting outcomes <p>Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Insufficient follow up (no further development of concepts) ● Uninteresting business cases, or outcomes of the battle ● Research partners investing most of their time in the Media Battle
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Conclusion

The Media Battle is a form of education in cooperation with the professional field and researchers. It can have significant benefits for students, companies and researchers. For students it provides an opportunity to work on a real life case in a learning and competitive environment. For commissioning companies or organisations it is a low cost way to test new business plans and get fresh new ideas from a young target group. For researchers it provides an opportunity to

come into contact with companies or organisations and show the value of their research. However, it requires a significant investment in time and money.

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