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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

A collaborative digital storytelling pedagogy for first year marketing education

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This paper presents a collaborative initiative involving educators (online and in-class), disciplinary researchers, digital media and learning designers, and an industry-based specialist to co-design a digital storytelling approach for a core first-year marketing course across five programs. Professionally relevant, industry-aligned curriculum is now a standard expectation among students, practitioners, and academics. However, first-year courses are typically theory-heavy, making it difficult for students to connect abstract concepts to real-world practice. To address this, we used a digital storytelling pedagogy to teach marketing students through work-simulated scenarios that place students at the centre of a fictional marketing team. The narrative structure was embedded across fully online and hybrid formats using a range of digital resources. This design enables students to engage with realistic professional challenges, apply theoretical knowledge, and build foundational problem-solving skills. A within-subjects research design was used to evaluate the impact of storytelling on student learning outcomes. Findings show that this approach creates more meaningful and engaging learning experiences, enhances the practical relevance of early tertiary education, and demonstrates the potential of digital storytelling as a bridge between theory and professional readiness. This work contributes to pedagogical innovation in marketing education and highlights the value of cross-functional collaboration in curriculum design.

Keywords: curriculum development, co-design practice, teaching innovation, digital storytelling, employability skills, learning analytics, within-subjects research design

Introduction

The call for more practice-oriented, professionally relevant curriculum in higher education is no longer optional. It is expected by students, mandated by accreditors and required by industry. Students seek relevance to the 'real-world' and employability (O'Neill & Short, 2025). Industry stakeholders prioritise graduates who can apply knowledge in dynamic, real-world contexts (Bughin et al., 2018; Finley, 2021). In the era of automation and artificial intelligence (AI), companies are focusing on hiring graduates with advanced IT, literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Bughin et al., 2018; Yeoh, 2019, Rohm, Stefl & Ward, 2021). Yet, higher education continues to be criticised for inadequate graduate preparation (Bhatti et al., 2022). Accrediting bodies, including the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2015), require the integration of theoretical learning with practical application.

Student feedback, especially from those in first-year courses, emphasised a disconnect between academic content and its real-world application. Over 23% of recent graduates reported feeling unprepared for employment (QILT, 2023), and a lack of relevance to future careers in early years of study has been linked to lower motivation and attrition (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018; Shaikh & Asif, 2022). When students do have an opportunity to interact with industry, this often occurs in their final years of study, and placement and internship costs contribute to the challenge of providing equitable opportunities for students (William et al, 2024).

The shift to digital learning environments post-pandemic has challenged this demand, introducing new complexities in engagement, skill development, and learner support (Sato et al., 2023). As educators we face the challenge of maintaining rigour while creating meaningful and motivating learning experiences that support student engagement and prepare learners for professional practice across diverse delivery modes (Wang et. al, 2023). Given that students, industry, and accrediting bodies consistently highlight the same

concern; the need to better connect theoretical learning with professional application, there is a clear imperative for these stakeholders to work collaboratively in shaping curriculum that meets these expectations.

The benefits of higher education and industry collaboration in designing academic curriculum have been established for all stakeholders involved i.e., students, academics and industry (Plewa, Muros & Davey, 2015). For students, it helps to address the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, develops skills like problem-solving (Popli & Singh, 2024) and improves the overall learning experience (Forsyth et al., 2008). It has also been reported that industry collaboration leads to an improvement in student academic performance, engagement, and employability (Popli & Singh, 2024). For academics it gives a better understanding of industry challenges and requirements, which better informs curriculum design and delivery making it more relevant and applied to industry (van der Sijde, 2012: Forsyth et al, 2008). Industry collaboration offers opportunities for authentic learning, as it can prepare students for future employment and provide a taste of the real-world (Pallant et al, 2024). Educators can design a variety of authentic activities, which can range from in-class case studies, simulations, roll-play to field trips and industry projects. They have shown improved student engagement and motivation, satisfaction and success rate (Saye, 2013).

Industry collaboration can enhance authenticity and relevance in higher education, but for first-year undergraduate students, especially in fully online environments, authentic assessments must be carefully scaffolded to match their readiness (Pallant et al, 2024). Without adequate support, complex tasks like live client briefs or open-ended problem-solving can be overwhelming, particularly online where students often face isolation, reduced instructor presence, and limited peer interaction. Curriculum co-design should therefore focus on gradually introducing authentic activities in a safe, supportive way to build confidence and skills before progressing to higher-stakes, industry-focused assessments.

Digital storytelling offers a powerful mechanism to overcome this challenge, by embedding students in simulated real-world contexts in a controlled, entertaining and supportive digitally rich environments. Digital storytelling presents a pedagogical solution by creating interactive and memorable learning experiences (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Choi, 2018), potentially addressing the critical areas for improvement. While not a new pedagogy (Suwardy et al., 2013), storytelling has yet to be widely used in teaching marketing in higher education, particularly in online and hybrid formats. With advancements in digital technology, the possibilities for incorporating storytelling elements into courses are vast (e.g. audio, video, image, narrative, interactive tools and collaborative applications).

This paper presents a collaborative response to these requirements. Drawing on cross-unit collaboration between in-class and 100% online educators, disciplinary researchers, digital media and learning designers and an industry-based consumer insights specialist, we co-designed an innovative, digitally embedded storytelling approach to teaching first-year students a core and pre-requisite course in five marketing programs. We use animated, work-simulated scenarios where students are placed at the centre of a fictional, but realistic, marketing team. The approach allows them to experience and respond to professional challenges, apply theoretical concepts, and develop industry-relevant skills such as problem-solving at a foundation level.

This paper explores how collaborative course design (guided by student feedback, shaped by industry insight, and enhanced by digital tools) can create more meaningful and engaging learning experiences. It offers a scalable model for integrating practical relevance into early-stage tertiary education and demonstrates the potential of digital storytelling as a bridge between theoretical instruction and industry readiness.

The research questions are:

1. Does digital storytelling improve problem-solving skills in online and hybrid learning environments?
2. Does the use of digital storytelling influence students' acquisition and application of marketing knowledge?
3. Does digital storytelling improving students' performance and engagement in the course (in online and hybrid environments)?

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Background

Digital Storytelling as Pedagogy in Marketing

Storytelling is a pedagogical approach for engaged student learning (Suwardy et al., 2013). It is used across institutions within society and has been employed in various discipline areas, such as education, health care, STEM, community engagement and more. Through storytelling, students not only gain a better understanding of concepts but also develop better critical and reflexive thinking skills (Yang & Wu, 2012). It is an important technique in the process of learning and understanding (Coulter & Poynor, 2015). In higher education, stories help personalise the learning experience (Wills, 1992; Abrahamson, 1998), empowering students by involving them actively in the learning process and the content delivered (Abrahamson 1998). Integrating storytelling into courses aids students in developing interpersonal skills required for networking and job prospects (Edelheim & Ueda, 2007). Stories can also enhance students' self-confidence and provide insights into the professional environment, easing their transition into the workforce (Grisham, 2006).

Although there are many known educational benefits for students when learning through storytelling (Suwardy et al., 2013), this pedagogical approach has not been widely used as a teaching tool in higher education in the marketing discipline. Storytelling is commonly used as an assessment technique, where students are taught how to tell a story to complete and engage with assessment tasks (Lazareva & Cruz-Martinez, 2021; Spanjaard et al., 2022).

Higher education has historically attracted criticisms for not preparing graduates for the real world. Educational approaches used were typically not well aligned with the required knowledge and skills that needed to be passed onto Marketing students (Rosa, 2012, Ferrell and Ferrell, 2020). With teaching increasingly moving online this has further exacerbated the problem; depersonalising education in an environment which is more challenging to equip job-ready Marketing graduates with transferable skills to succeed after graduation. Using storytelling as a medium will help with those shortfalls and create a context where students have an active ownership in their learning and can develop industry-relevant skills (Rapanta et al. 2021). A storytelling approach into marketing education also enhances the learning experience by grounding theoretical concepts in real-life scenarios and authentic industry contexts (Sole and Wilson, 2002; Edelheim & Ueda, 2007). This learning approach not only makes learning materials more tangible and memorable but also creates excitement and anticipation among students. As a result, students will share their sense of discovery, become more cognitively engaged and motivated (see Lohr et al., 2021).

As the marketing landscape continues to evolve with advancements in digital technologies (Davenport et al. 2020), incorporating storytelling into educational design will help to meet industry demands and students' expectations for interactive and engaging learning environments that bring them closer to industry. The stories we have created provide students with a real insight into marketing practice in a first-year course. This provides students with the opportunity to experience what a boardroom scenario may look like and actively participate in practical decision making.

Method

Collaborative Curriculum Design Approach

To meet the demand for practical, authentic learning, we adopted a collaborative design approach involving industry professionals, marketing academics, online and blended delivery experts, researchers from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, and an audio-visual (AV) production team. This cross-functional collaboration drew on a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) framework and co-design pedagogy. Animated, work-simulated scenarios extended WIL principles (Orrell, 2011) into first-year learning, offering all students early exposure to real-world challenges without relying on limited internships. Using constructive alignment (Svinicki, 2010), story-based simulations connected learning outcomes with authentic assessments, requiring students to apply marketing concepts to realistic business challenges. This ensured that the curriculum did not merely "include" industry relevance as an add-on, but embedded it into the learning process from the outset. Our approach reflects collaborative curriculum design (Zeivotz et al., 2025), where academics, industry, and research partners co-create knowledge. Academics ensured rigour and progression, industry contributed workplace insights and authenticity, and researchers validated complexity and relevance. AV specialists developed animated assets to support engagement across delivery modes. This co-design

process fostered shared responsibility and ensured curriculum innovation aligned with both educational and industry needs.

We applied the following principles of digital storytelling (see table 1), developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (2005), which are often cited as a useful starting point to begin working with digital stories (Robin, 2006).

Table 1
The seven elements of digital storytelling

Point of view	What is the perspective of the author?
A dramatic question	A question that will be answered by the end of the story
Emotional content	Serious issues that speak to us in a personal and powerful way
The gift of your voice	A way to personalise the story to help the audience understand the context
The power of the soundtrack	Music or other sounds that support the storyline
Economy	Simply put, using just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer with too much information
Pacing	Deals with how slowly or quickly the story progresses

Focus of the project

Our overall project is focussed on Marketing undergraduate students enrolled in the first-year course Consumer Behaviour in the online and traditional hybrid modes of delivery from 2024 to 2026 (approx. n=900). This project has obtained ethics approval. The Consumer Behaviour course is offered for 10 weeks four times a year. For the purpose of this paper, we only report on two iterations of this course, online (n=60) and hybrid (n=150). In the 100% online environment, each week students are required to watch a series of content videos covering the relevant topic, complete online learning activities and attend a weekly virtual zoom session with the teaching staff and students. In the traditional hybrid environment, students are required to attend a two-hour online lecture and one-hour in person tutorial each week. Across all modes of course delivery, all course resources and materials are uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS), Moodle. In taking a storytelling approach, we created a variety of digital resources to support existing course materials. The story presented real-life marketing scenarios to bring the course concepts to life in a novel, entertaining and engaging way.

Participants in the project are first-year undergraduate students. Table 2 provides a demographic breakdown of online and hybrid participants. Students were notified via email about the project. Student participation in the project was optional, if students did not wish to participate, they were given the option to opt out. We did not have any students opt out.

Table 2
Participant demographics

	Gender		Age				International	
	Female	Male	18-24	25-29	30-34	35+	Yes	No
Online (n=60)	58	42	62	25	5	8	2	98
Hybrid (n=150)	67	33	89	9	1	1	25	75

Project Approach

The project approach involved three stages.

1. **Developing the storyline**

In our story, the student plays the main character, a recruit in a graduate program at a fictitious consumer goods company. The student's character works in the marketing division of this organisation and is assigned to different marketing areas (i.e., consumer insights, branding, market research, operations) on a rotational basis, as per real-life graduate programs. As the story is introduced in the Consumer Behaviour course, the student will begin their graduate program working with the Consumer Insights team. The course runs for ten weeks

and each week covers a new topic. The story is interwoven in five out of the ten weeks. This was purposely designed in order to compare and evaluate the impact the story has on student engagement, knowledge acquisition and developing problem-solving skills.

2. Creating and implementing the stories and digital learning resources

We scripted a series of seven short, animated stories, each of which corresponded to particular course topics. We started the process by drafting the overall story outline mapping it to course learning outcomes and assessments, and writing the scripts for each video. Our story was first peer reviewed by two academic colleagues from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science and then an industry expert. The review served the purpose of ensuring we presented the course content through a lens of marketing challenges that can be solved with evidence-based consumer insights, and to also ensure that there was scope for the story to be introduced into a second and third year Marketing course, should the story be used at a programmatic level in the future. The industry reviewer works as a Consumer Insights Manager and is involved with the company's Graduate Program. This reviewer provided us with feedback on how the graduate program is structured within an organisation and advised on terminology used in the narrative and dialogue, to better reflect current 'industry speak' and portray the characters more authentically in the story's organisation. The UniSA Teaching and Innovation (TIU) AV Team produced the videos using Vyond Video Studio, an animated video creation software program using our story scripts, and voice-overs for the characters were created by our talented academic staff.

3. Data collection and evaluation strategy

The research design employs a within-sample randomised control trial to test the digital storytelling's effectiveness in teaching Consumer Behaviour concepts. Data was gathered using the LMS learning analytics (LA) to measure and compare student engagement levels during the study period. Engagement was assessed through analytics tracking interactions with the course materials and digital story resources. For knowledge acquisition, students' understanding was evaluated through summative assessment tasks linked to the stories in certain storytelling weeks. A comparative analysis of test results from storytelling and non-storytelling weeks assessed the intervention's impact on learning retention. Problem-solving skills were evaluated using a marking rubric aligned with the Assurance of Learning (AOL) standards of AACSB accreditor to benchmark results against AOL criteria to observe improvements in skill development. Short student surveys (administered via the LMS) were also included to assess student perceptions of each animated video directly after watching it. Videos were classified into three categories: 1/ videos that suggest a marketing decision; 2/ videos that explain concepts; and 3/ videos that call for action. Depending on the purpose of the video, students were asked to evaluate each video on a selection of the following questions: *How **engaging** did you find the resource?; How **entertaining** did you find the resource?; How much did the resource help you **understand** consumer buying behaviour?; How much did the story **motivate** you to review the course content of this week's topic?; How much did the story spark your **curiosity** about whether the suggested marketing decision is right?; How **confident** do you feel in solving the problem presented in the story? These items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)*. All of the short surveys also included an open-ended question for any additional student feedback on the animated videos.

Results

At the time of writing this paper we collected, analysed and reported on two iterations of data (from 2024) i.e., one fully online (n=60) and one hybrid (n=150) delivery. Results presented at the conference will also include 2025 data for online and hybrid deliveries (this data was not ready to include at the time of writing).

Student engagement

Students were asked to complete a short survey following each animated video connected to the story, evaluating six items. The surveys were optional. The response rates for the online and hybrid cohorts were 35% and 49% respectively. The items included in each survey depended on the purpose of the survey. Table 3 below presents the mean results and the sample sizes of those students who completed the surveys. Overall, the hybrid group (n=74) rated engagement, entertainment, and motivation slightly higher, compared to the online group (n=21), suggesting the storytelling video resources were slightly better received in the hybrid format. The hybrid format seems to have provided a marginally more effective experience across most items, particularly in terms of understanding and confidence. The videos supported clearer conceptual grasp when

complemented by in-person discussion, and students felt more assured applying theory when videos were embedded within a broader hybrid learning structure.

Table 3
Student Feedback Summary

On a scale from 1-7…	Online (n=21)	Hybrid (n=74)
Engaging	4.4	4.7
Entertaining	4.2	4.5
Motivating	4.0	4.4
Curiosity	4.2	4.2
Understanding	4.3	5.1
Confidence	3.8	4.3

At the end of each survey, students were asked if they would like to continue learning with storytelling. 100% of the online cohort stated that they would like to continue learning with storytelling, while 68% of the hybrid cohort stated a willingness to continue with this teaching approach.

Verbatim student feedback from both online and hybrid cohorts was largely positive. They valued the storytelling approach as an engaging and innovative alternative to traditional teaching, noting that narrative and real-life scenarios made learning more relatable, motivating, and enjoyable. Students reported that it helped them visualise theoretical concepts, better understand course content, and provide clear direction for problem-solving and assessment tasks. Many highlighted that the format made abstract ideas more tangible and fostered a stronger sense of connection and support than typical courses. Representative comments included: *'A great strategy to motivate students and introduce them to working in the industry', 'I found the Alpha story delivery helpful and it gives good direction towards the areas to research and develop assessment around'* and *'This is such a unique way of translating course content I am actually excited to dive in.'*

Some areas of improvement suggested by the hybrid cohort related to explicitly connecting the video content to other course resources, and the comedic relief used in the videos.

We also sought feedback from hybrid mode tutors regarding their perception of the storytelling approach and student learning and engagement. Overall tutors were positive, stating that they supported continuing with the storytelling approach. They perceived it as a refreshing alternative that enhanced delivery and student engagement. Tutors noted that the videos created realistic, relatable contexts, helping students grasp theoretical concepts and stay engaged, especially when used in class. One tutor highlighted that pausing and revisiting segments aided problem-solving by guiding students toward correct answers. While storytelling boosted overall engagement, some students remained passive, and tutors expressed concern that in-class viewing reduced independent interaction. Overall, tutors valued the change in delivery style and saw it as contributing to knowledge acquisition and classroom energy: *'The videos provide a change to the typical lecture style delivery and provides students with real-life work situations...', 'I found these weeks more fun to teach and could rewind to certain sections to guide students to the right answer if they were unable to answer questions…'*

Knowledge acquisition

To measure knowledge acquisition, we looked at student engagement with course video resources and their performance in the course. There were a total 65 videos in the online delivery of the course and 57 videos for hybrid, including content and instructional videos. The LAs showed that the storytelling videos drove high engagement among both the online and hybrid cohorts. For the online cohort, five out of the seven videos made it to the top 15 watched videos. For the hybrid cohort, four of seven made the top 15 watched.

We compared storytelling video viewing with student's final course grades. Across both cohorts we found that those students who engaged with the story videos were able to achieve higher grades. For the online cohort, students who watched 6-7 videos achieved higher grades than those who watched fewer than 6 videos (see Figure 1 below). For hybrid students we looked at tutorial attendance, as the storytelling videos were shown

and discussed in class. Hybrid students who attended all tutorials when the Alpha videos were shown in class were able to achieve higher grades than students who did not attend these tutorials (see Figure 2 below).

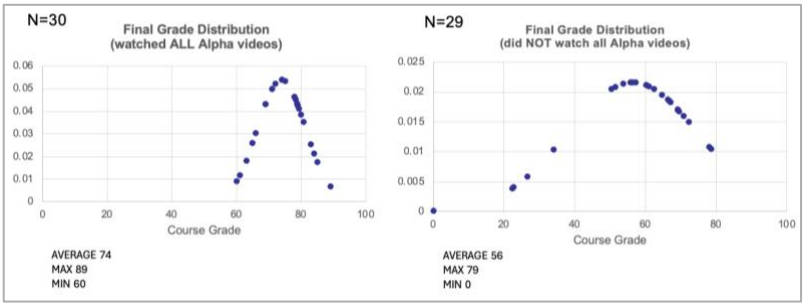

Figure 1. Online final grade distribution

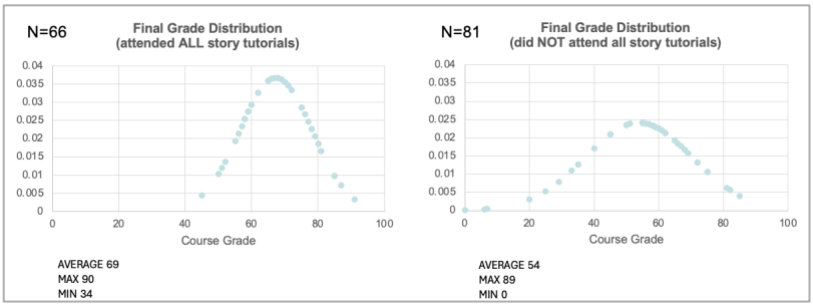

Figure 2. Hybrid final grade distribution

We also looked at student grades at each level of performance and compared them to earlier semesters where no storytelling was embedded in the course. A chi-square test was conducted to examine the difference in performance across the semesters. Compared to previous semesters, there were significantly more students at the higher end of the grading scale and fewer students failing the course or dropping out of the course in both online and hybrid modalities *(distribution of performance levels is significantly different across study periods $p<0.001$)*.

Problem solving

To assess students' problem solving skills, we used marking rubrics. Students were evaluated separately on identifying the problem and solving the problem using course content. Problem solving was evaluated across four summative tests. Test 1 and Test 2 were linked to the story, while Test 3 and Test 4 were linked to course topics where the story was not embedded. We compared individual scores between the tests to track improvement. The problem solving results are based on the 2024 student cohort who completed all four tests in both modalities, i.e., online n=54 and hybrid n=85.

To examine changes in students' ability to identify and solve problems across the four tests we conducted multiple pairwise comparisons following a repeated measures ANOVA, for both online and hybrid cohorts.

For problem identification and problem solving the results show that that online students' ability to identify the problem improved from Test 1 to Test 4. Results revealed a significant main effect on scores (for ability to identify a problem: $F(1, 647.455) = 2257$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta p2 = 0.978$ and for problem solving: $F(1, 615.399) = 2298$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta p2 = 0.978$, indicating that students ability to identify and solve the problem improved over time. These findings however suggest that while students demonstrated early improvement in identifying the problem, performance gains plateaued in later tests.

The results suggest that online students who initially struggled with problem identification demonstrated improvement and were able to maintain this progress by the final assessment. In contrast, students who performed strongly in Test 1 showed lower scores in Tests 2 and Test 4.

For the hybrid cohort, the effect was stronger, with significant improvement. For problem identification and problem solving the results show that that hyrbid students' ability to identify the problem improved from Test 1 to Test 4. Results revealed a significant main effect on scores (for ability to identify a problem: $F(2.587, 217.302) = 10.471$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta p2 = 0.111$ and for problem solving: $F(1, 794.68) = 923.76$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta p2 = 0.917$, indicating that hybrid students' ability to identify and solve the problem changed significantly over time.

Comparing Test 1 and Test 2 among the hybrid cohort, improvements were observed in students' performance on solving the problem, suggesting that the use of storytelling may have supported their ability to develop strategies and recommendations. However, performance between Test 1 and Test 4 showed greater variability. Unlike earlier assessments, Test 4 was not directly linked to the story, which may have made it more challenging for students to formulate logical strategies. This difficulty could also reflect the characteristics of the cohort, which included a higher proportion of younger, school-leaver students who may still be developing these higher-order thinking skills.

Across both online and hybrid cohorts we generally observed improvements in identifying and solving the problem from Test 1 to Test 2 (which were linked to the story), with some variability with the subsequent tests (not linked to the story). This pattern may reflect the nature of the feedback provided, potentially emphasising errors over strengths, or a decline in engagement following early success. Some of the observed changes in student performance could also potentially be explained by regression to the mean. This statistical phenomenon occurs when individuals with extreme scores on an initial assessment tend to score closer to the average on subsequent assessments, purely due to random variation. As such, improvements among initially low-performing students or declines among high-performing students should be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect natural statistical tendencies rather than genuine changes in ability.

Discussion and Contribution

The collaborative storytelling pedagogy has effectively bridged theory with practice by presenting content through relatable, real-world scenarios that enhanced authenticity and relevance. This method of delivery not only supported students' conceptual understanding but also contributed to increased confidence in applying their knowledge in a safe, low stakes environment allowing students to practise and apply their skills. This engaging and entertaining format of content delivery elevated the overall student experience, leading to stronger engagement and improved learning outcomes. Students demonstrated enhanced problem-solving skills, with many able to identify and address marketing challenges more effectively as the course progressed.

This research contributes to both pedagogical literature and teaching practice by demonstrating the potential of digital storytelling to reinvigorate marketing education in online and hybrid learning environments. In line with the theme of fostering partnerships in tertiary education, the project highlights how co-designed, narrative-based learning experiences can bridge the gap between theory and practice while addressing persistent challenges such as student engagement, retention, and skill development (Yeoh, 2019; Bhatti, 2022).

Our findings show that storytelling, particularly when grounded in industry-relevant scenarios, can serve as an effective pedagogical framework that enhances interactivity, authenticity, and learner motivation. Consistent narratives woven throughout course content create a cohesive experience that sustains attention, fosters deeper engagement, and develops problem-solving, critical thinking, and curiosity, skills that are essential in marketing practice.

The project also models meaningful industry-academic collaboration, with practitioners contributing real-world insights through storytelling. From a curriculum perspective, digital storytelling offers a framework that aligns teaching with AQF standards and industry expectations (AQF, 2015; Bughlin et al., 2018). It not only strengthens content delivery but also embeds employability skills such as communication, creativity, and applied problem-solving. While demonstrated at a unit level, this approach has potential for broader program application.

We can also see benefits of this approach to the wider society. By fostering meaningful engagement and improved learning outcomes, digital storytelling contributes to the development of graduates that are not only

theoretically informed but also practically capable. In doing so, it supports the creation of a future workforce who are better prepared to drive innovation and apply their learning in diverse, real-world contexts.

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