Embedding Live Briefs in the Curriculum: A guide for good practice

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Live briefs have been consistently given to students on the Creative Advertising degree courses at Falmouth since their launch over 12 years ago. This has taken place in a number of different ways, but it is only in the past two years that the live briefs have resulted in the student ideas being put into production.

About The Author  
Lucy Cokes is a senior lecturer at Falmouth University, School of Communications. She has been working in higher education for the past nine years and is a fellow of Advance HE. She leads the Behaviour Change for Good modules on the Advertising courses and started the inhouse agency ‘BE good’ to manage the live projects. Prior to this she ran a highly successful digital marketing agency with 80 staff in the UK across 3 offices.

Projects from ‘BE good’ can be seen on Instagram @begoodfalmouth

A live brief can be defined as ‘a type of design project that is distinct from a typical studio project in its engagement of real clients or users, in real-time settings.’ (Sara, 2006, p. 1)

Typically, live briefs come to the lecturers through their network of contacts and are given to the students to tackle either as part of their assessment or as an extra curriculum opportunity. These opportunities have often resulted in students gaining paid or unpaid placements at agencies or being offered full time positions after graduation.

As a result of this the use of live briefs in this way does not give equal opportunity to students from different backgrounds. Less privileged students frequently work almost full time at the evenings and weekends to support themselves financially while studying, indeed 55% of UK students now work an average of 13.5 hours a week (BBC, 2023). This means they are less available to take on any extra curriculum assignments, nor accept unpaid placements. Indeed, as outlined by the Social Mobility Commission “Unpaid internships are damaging for social mobility. It is time to consign them to history” (Milburn, 2017). *So here I draw a parallel with extra curriculum briefs and unpaid internships…*

Without fully embedding these live opportunities into assessment we are inadvertently disadvantaging the already disadvantaged. Over the past two years I have worked on two live briefs with our local council, both with an overall behavioural change objective of reducing violence against women and girls (VAGWG).

Each year I worked with the client to:

* write up a polished, clear creative brief
* provide the client with timelines to work alongside the students existing hand-in deadlines

I then made the briefs and associated collateral available on the learning space and embedded the live brief in the student’s assessment brief for their module as one of the options. When launching the module, I made it clear that if the students chose to work on this brief they would need to do a live presentation (pitch) to the client and that one of the ideas would be chosen, put into production and their work would be paid for.

The students gave professional presentations to pitch their ideas to the client, and each student was paid a nominal amount for this. After all their work had been handed in for that study block the chosen student was paid to develop their creative work over the summer. Their campaigns were then put into production. In the first year for example the campaign was live on social media, local buses, and billboards in the local area. It resulted in me leading a student outing to go and visit the live campaign designed by one of our students. In the second year the campaign went live in a local further educational institution, both in all the common areas and also online.

There are barriers to engaging companies in this process as they must:

* Make contact nearly 8 months prior to the work being in production.
* Be willing to work around our pre-established assessment deadlines.
* Be willing to take risks in working with students (non-completion of work for example)

If we asked students to be ready to pitch their ideas in advance of their assessment deadline it would mean we would be asking them to work at a different pace to their peers who had not chosen to take on the live brief, therefore disadvantaging the students we are trying to support most. The pitches had been timed to take place one week before the hand-in deadline for their assessments, acting as an additional formative assessment feedback event. It has meant that the students who chose to work on their live brief were able to work on their ideas alongside their peers in the workshops and tutorials already timetabled, but also receive some additional support. To further improve equity I could change the assessment breif so all students are assessed via a live pitch, meaning there is no additional work for those students choosing to answer the live brief. Alternatively to improve equity I could make it so that all students must choose the live brief, which would in turn mean more ideas for the clients to choose from.

The students whose ideas were put into production were then paid for their time over the summer to do this, with full guidance of myself who was acting as art director and project manager for the projects. Part of their payment was always kept back to be paid on full completion of the project to mitigate against the risk of students going AWOL.

**Evaluation**

Involvement in these projects has provided the students with general employability skills but also specific experience that they would not have otherwise gained on the course. Real learning is taking place doing these live briefs as ‘Learning takes place through the active behaviour of the student’ (Tyler, 2013, p. 63)

The general employability skills gained from participating in the live briefs including these elements taken from the 39 aspects of employability (Yorke & Knight, 2003).:

* Personal Qualities: Self-confidence, independence, adaptability, stress tolerance, initiative, willingness to learn
* Core Skills: Self-management, critical analysis, creativity, listening, oral presentations, explaining.
* Process Skills: computer literacy, commercial awareness, political sensitivity, prioritising, planning, coping with complexity, problem solving, influencing, resolving conflict, decision making, negotiating, team work

Specific experience for our students has included:

* Pitching ideas in person to clients, where one idea will be chosen
* working with real life budgets on a spreadsheet
* working with a project plan on a spreadsheet
* dealing with feedback and constraints on designs from clients
* production of print ready artwork
* production of artwork and copy for social media
* seeing physical artwork in the real world that they produced
* working collaboratively with graphic designers, animators and printers

The additional outcome for the students involved is the ability to include this work in their portfolio and include the paid project work on their CV.

“Practical intelligence plays an important part in success in life; academic intelligence is not sufficient” (Sternberg, 1997, cited in York, 2005, p. 5)

The production of live student work visible to the public is also a good recruitment driver for the course and the University as a whole.

It is not straightforward to embed live briefs into the assessment which results in payment for students. The biggest hurdle is finding individuals within organisations who are willing to adapt their working processes to meet the needs. To assist in this process, the benefits to the companies really need to be highlighted, they include:

* Professional quality work, at a significantly lower cost
* Having a wide range of ideas to choose from during the pitching process.
* Having a mentor /project manager and point of contact for the students.
* Fulfilment in engaging with the students and providing them with valuable experiences.
* Having access to university systems/contacts and buying power

Possibly this is best suited to non-profits, small businesses or government agency as is suggested by O’Hara in her case study (Haines, 2018).

Student feedback

“My first campaign went live today! It’s been an extremely valuable and exciting experience. I’m so grateful that I could work on such an important campaign for Safer Cornwall.” Justyna Skowronska, BA(hons) Creative Advertising

“*Ok so I would say that this is the single most valuable experience I've had through my whole year here at Falmouth :) This taught me pitching skills, really enhanced my ability to collaborate and problem solve, as well as making me feel really positive and motivated about my work because I was helping to enact some real change for some real people. I have recently been rewriting my CV to apply for jobs and this project holds the biggest paragraph on the page, I think it's been a really invaluable experience for my future employability because it proves that I can function well within a professional environment and work effectively to deadlines set outside of, and alongside, my university commitments.”* Annie Gault MA Creative Advertising

“*Having to work on a real live paid brief definitely brought some good pressure to the table. The fact that the work was not being produced solely for academic purposes but also for a real-life client, and with the possible actual implementation of it, for me it very much shifted the way in which I was looking at and approaching the brief. …… Overall I believe implementing live paid briefs in assessments is a useful and insightful way to start merging university and work, and give students the opportunity to put into real practice what they are studying as a degree, and see this practice being implemented in real life.”*

Pietro Ferrari, BA Marketing Communication student

Client feedback

"When we spoke to students in Falmouth about this, there were three clear asks - social change, support and increased security. Safer Cornwall is thrilled to have this chance to think creatively around tackling VAWG, and to work with world-leading Falmouth University in this space." Louise Knight, Cornwall Council

“I thought the standard, confidence and professionalism of the student pitches and research was exceptional.” Chris Thompson, Grey Digital

In essence I believe this assessment strategy will increase the equity and employability by assessing an authentic task, developing their creative problem-solving skills and in turn increasing student satisfaction.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of the use of Live Briefs in University Teaching. Ranked based on perceived equity and employability status.

I produced the hierarchy above to assist lecturers when deciding how to use live briefs in their teaching.

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