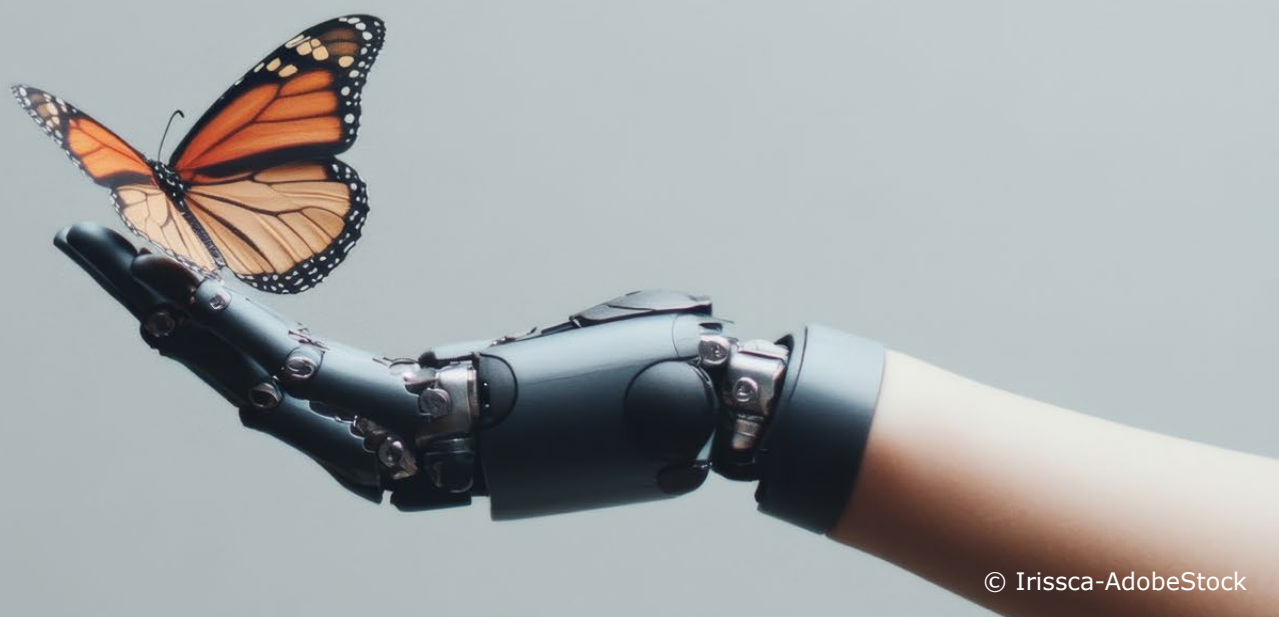




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The Brand Activation Challenge: AI workflow in action

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Abstract

Teaching about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and teaching with AI are equally important, as learning how to use AI, responsibly and critically, is becoming a crucial skill for Business & Management students. This Impact Paper presents The Brand Activation Challenge, an experiential learning workshop that helps Master in Management (MIM) Consulting specialization students to gain real-world marketing experience, exploring the synergy between Automation Platforms and AI capabilities, and prepare themselves for technology-enabled jobs. The challenge consists of a 6-hours workshop in which, after an introduction to the foundation of AI and AI workflows (about 2 hours), the teams are asked to work as consultants for an assigned brand to generate an AI powered marketing activation for their client's brand and a pitch to present it, which must include a live demo of the designed solution and AI workflow. The combination of marketing strategy and automatization, the conceptualization and the development of a working AI solution in such short time, allows students to discover tools and an approach that blends business with technology. This is extremely important for future business leaders who must speak the language of tech to thrive and succeed.

Keywords: Experiential learning, learning by doing, innovating pedagogies, AI workflow, marketing automatization

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The Brand Activation Challenge: AI workflow in action

Experiential pedagogy in the age of Large Language Model (LLM) and generative AI (Gen AI)

While the individual use of AI tools is becoming common, learning to use AI is critical for students, as AI will undoubtedly play a significant role in their future professional lives (Milberg, 2024).

The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) presents extraordinary opportunities for pedagogical innovation (Pucciarelli and Cobo-Benita, 2022). generative AI, in particular, has the potential to shape the future of marketing (Grewal et al., 2024), and marketing education alike (Acar, 2024; Grewal et al., 2025).

But how do you effectively teach students to critically engage with AI?

Many different answers are possible, as different activities and level of integration of GenAI in teaching are possible, ranging from using AI as instructor teaching assistant (e.g., in providing feedback to student and helping out in the assessment, lesson planning and preparation, etc.), but also through the design of hands-on assignments (in class or at home) and activities (individual or group based) that incorporate AI tools.

The more profound impact lies in integrating AI directly into experiential learning activities (Browning et al., 2024; Sun and Deng, 2025), to encourage deeper learning and unlock a world of creative possibilities in a more dynamic learning environment (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

In this work we describe an in-class workshop exposing ESCP Business School Master in Management (MIM) students to an integrated marketing AI workflow learning by doing experience.

AI developments: from “just prompting” to more sophisticated and autonomous AI-designed solutions

The landscape of Artificial Intelligence has evolved dramatically, moving from relatively passive, prompt-driven models (as ChatGPT early models) to more sophisticated use cases to automatize and thus replicate tasks as many times as needed (so-called AI workflows), to the cutting-edge development of Agentic AI.

Early releases of ChatGPT started the initial wave (and hype) of readily accessible generative AI. These models, powered by Large Language Models (LLMs), excelled at generating human-like text in response to user prompts. Their core characteristic was a responsive nature. Users had to provide explicit and detailed instructions (prompts) to guide the AI towards a desired outcome. For example, to write an essay, a user would need to outline the role undertaken, the scope of the essay, the topic, structure, tone of voice, lengths, and often even specific points to cover. While revolutionary in their ability to understand and generate coherent language, their utility was largely confined to single-turn interactions or extended conversations that still required continuous human guidance and refinement, iterating on prompts to achieve the desired output.

The next significant leap came with the concept of AI workflows. This stage represents a shift from individual, prompted interactions to the automation and replication of processes.

AI workflows integrate various AI tools and models into predefined sequences of operations to streamline tasks. Here, AI isn't just generating text; it is actively participating in a multi-step process, which often involves chaining together different AI capabilities (and data). For instance, an AI workflow might automatically process incoming invoices, extract key data, validate it against a database, and then trigger a payment, flagging any discrepancies for human review. While significantly more autonomous than early ChatGPT, these workflows still operate within predefined parameters and structured pathways, excelling at high-volume, repeatable tasks where the general process remains consistent.

The latest frontier in AI is now dominated by agentic AI. This represents the pinnacle of AI evolution, moving beyond pre-programmed workflows to systems capable of autonomous decision-making and goal-oriented action. Agentic AI systems are designed to perceive their environment, reason about complex goals, plan multi-step solutions, and execute actions with minimal human intervention. Crucially, they can learn from experiences and adapt to new situations, continuously refining their strategies to achieve objectives. This involves not just processing information, but actively retrieving it from various sources, analysing context, and even reflecting on past actions to improve future performance. Imagine an agentic AI tasked with managing a marketing campaign: it could autonomously research target demographics, generate creative content, manage ads placement, analyse performance data, and even adjust the campaign strategy in real time based on evolving metrics, all without constant human oversight. The distinguishing factor is their "agency" – the ability to take proactive, intelligent action to solve problems, often by breaking down complex tasks into sub-goals and dynamically choosing the tools and steps needed to achieve them. This shift from passive response to proactive autonomy marks a profound transformation in how AI interacts with and shapes our world.

The Brand Activation Challenge (design)in a nutshell

The Brand Activation Challenge is a six-hours workshop which turns students, divided in teams of about 5 team members, into an AI consulting boutique. Each team has been hired by the Head of Marketing of an important corporation (preselected by the instructors and assigned to the teams), to build an AI-Storyteller to let children create branded stories (this is a real example of AI application which is gaining momentum).

The Challenge combines lecturing moments with experiential learning. The Challenge starts with an introduction to visual development and automation platforms and AI, providing the basics of AI and its technical foundations, exploring the synergies between these automation platforms and AI capabilities. These include the presentation of case studies and examples where AI workflows have been effectively combined for business impact, to provide to the class with the foundational theoretical knowledge needed to then execute in their team the hands-on experience.

The (team) goal of the Brand Activation Challenge is to show to the client how AI can have huge business impact in increasing brand awareness among a (given) target segment of customers (i.e., families with children, Italians, in the example here presented). Each team has four hours to design and test the marketing activation for their client brand and get ready for a pitch, which must include a live demo of the AI solution built by the team (the Storyteller and the form built to personalize it), its AI workflow, its business impact and a list of future improvements.

To enhance AI solution design and ensure both the active participation of each student and the team's ability to complete the Challenge, minimizing the time spent in technical aspect, and thus allowing more time for working at the design and test of the solution, four types

of supports are provided during the Challenge: 1. Pre-selected tools to be used in the Challenge (namely: OpenAI, Fillout, Make, Airtable) and access to them; 2. System Prompt examples; 3. a detailed video tutorial (of about 13' 55') on AI workflow with the pre-selected mandatory AI tools to be used for the Challenge, was made available to the class, first individually, and then replayed at the team's convenience during the Challenge; 4. constant support from the instructors (in the pilot, there were 3 of us), who stay in the class room and sit with each team, various times to address issues and questions together with the team.

The challenge was co-designed by the course Professor (Francesca Pucciarelli) and two former students of hers (Daniel Levis and Davide Silvestri), who after studying themselves at ESCP Business School, together founded Soraia, a Software & AI start-up, offering marketing processes automation and AI integration (among other services).

The challenge was introduced in the last two academic years with Master in Management (MIM) students of the Turin specialization in Consulting in my "Online Analytics and Business Intelligence" course. This specific class was chosen to test the Challenge, for two main reasons. Firstly, because of their strategic business acumen and skill set, ranging from problem-solving and analytical mindset to strategic thinking and value creation focus; from project management and teamwork to client-facing communication skills (all very necessary to success in the challenge)- made them a natural fit for such learning by doing activity. Second, because the challenge offers them the possibility to future-proof skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly AI-driven consulting landscape.

Benefits of the Brand Activation Challenge

The Brand Activation Challenge provides each student with a personal case study that incorporates brand audit, marketing campaign design and execution, through automation AI workflow, and a final presentation about the Brand Activation designed in front of the instructors (fictional clients) and the rest of the class.

Significant advantages were experienced deploying these integrated AI workflows within an in-class team workshop. The team dynamics leveraged on the capabilities and competences of each team member allowing a deeper discussion and a quicker AI workflow design; whilst the face-to-face learning environment, allowed to call the "experts" (both the Professor and the Soraia team) to receive tailored mentorship about each group-specific case deployment, answering team members' questions, and co-constructing with them their ideal AI workflow configurations. Moreover, the competition in between teams embedded in the challenge made the entire workshop even more engaging and MIM students reported a number of positive learning outcomes.

The **benefits** of the challenges go further than the practical application of theory, moving beyond theoretical knowledge of AI to **hands-on experience**, bridging the gap between business strategy and technological implementation. This could potentially **enhance student employability**, because in a world in GenAI is rapidly becoming a critical skill in the job market, especially for consultants, such hands-on experience provides a significant competitive advantage. But it is also a way to **develop new skills sets**, such as: prompt engineering (namely learning to craft effective prompts to guide GenAI models); AI workflow design, evaluation and iteration (conceptualizing how GenAI can solve specific business problems, launching and refining AI workflow outputs); innovation and creating (appreciating the power of GenAI as powerful tool for ideation in the context of a specific use case could inspire students in using it to develop innovative solutions for traditional business challenges); ethical AI considerations (addressed inside the team, while building the AI solution and then in plenary while presenting it, topics such as data privacy, and

responsible AI deployment). Last but not least the Brand Activation Challenge represents a **networking opportunity**, by collaborating with AI specialists.

Students recognized the usefulness of the workshop in the post-course feedback survey. Both cohorts expressed enthusiastic feedback on the workshop: all agreed on the usefulness of the challenge, dedicated words of appreciation in terms of both how interesting and engaging this experiential learning activity was (see selected comments taken from the post-course student satisfaction survey).

<i>Student from</i>	Question “742 - What did you like most about the course?”
MIM AY 2023-2024	The No-Code exercises at the end of the module was very engaging and interesting
MIM AY 2023-2024	The workshop with the no programming method was so interesting, I would have liked to have this kind of learning during the whole semester
MIM AY 2023-2024	Great class with very concrete experience with low code no code challenge ! Loved it
MIM AY 2023-2024	The ability to practice consulting in real time.
MIM AY 2024-2025	The challenge was very relevant and helpful, such automation tools are very often used in startups
MIM AY 2024-2025	The one-day challenge was excellent and should definitely be kept for future editions.

Interestingly enough one of the feedback items that clearly emerged was the usefulness of this full-day immersion in latest tech applications. Whilst informally (verbally at the end of the challenge) the main shared feeling was the surprise at how easy and quick it was for the team of (relatively) inexperienced Master students to build an automatized marketing activation at the age of GenAI.

Conclusion

Learning to use AI critically and responsibly is becoming an increasingly vital skill for students, that is why teaching about AI and teaching with AI are both crucially important. The Impact Paper describes the Brand Activation Challenge, an in-class experiential learning activity designed to challenge Master in Management Consulting specialization students with integrated AI workflow experience. The challenge turns students into AI consultants, who have to prove the potential of Automation & AI for business impact. The challenge is designed to effectively use marketing strategy and marketing automatization to generate a Storyteller children can use to create branded stories.

While the specific characteristic of the chosen course cohort provides a robust mindset and skills set foundation, the Brand Activation Challenge offers them the practical experience to further develop their skills set and, ultimately, enhance their employability. They don't just understand what GenAI is, but how to apply it effectively to deliver business value, serving as a tangible project to add to their CV demonstrating their AI capabilities to future employers. The Brand Activation Challenge is highly adaptable with other audiences, for example undergraduate marketing and MBA students.

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