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Simulated Learning: Assessing Student Perceptions of Skill Development and Employability in a Criminology Course

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, there is an increasing focus on enhancing student employability as an outcome of successful university study (Pavlin and Svetlik 2014). While definitions of employability remain contested, the marketisation of universities in the UK and globally, (Wilton, 2014) has proliferated managerial approaches and metrics to assess student outcomes. The emergent Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK (Office for Students, 2018) intends to include graduate 'employment' within their metrics to assess teaching excellence. Thus, universities have implemented a range of approaches to developing the employability of their students, whether curricular, extra-curricular, or co-curricular.

This paper will outline a rationale for developing a simulation module for criminology undergraduate students, along with a description of how the module was operationalised adopting experiential learning approaches and utilising models of reflection (Schon, 1983, Gibbs, 1988). The module was developed in partnership with practitioners, and adopted six active learning techniques to deliver student centred learning (O'Neill and McMahon 2005):

outside speakers - visiting criminal justice professionals; criminal justice agency student visits; the provision of a reflective student work book; service learning in the form of opportunities for student placements; assessments designed to facilitate student reflection on their own career pathways, and an imaginary case study approach framework for the teaching delivery.

Using summative assessments as a data set, a thematic analysis highlighted from students' own perspective, how their employability and skills have been developed as a consequence of undertaking the module. These include articulating transferable skills (Monks et al, 2009, Pollard et al 2015; Jackson 2016), personal growth through developing empathy and compassion and the identification of new opportunities. Finally, pragmatic recommendations are made for others contemplating developing similar learning opportunities.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the UK, as internationally (Pavlin and Svetlik, 2014), there is an increasing focus on enhancing student employability as an outcome of successful university study. While definitions of employability remain contested, alongside plentiful critique of the purpose of a university education, both outside the scope of this paper, the marketisation of universities in the UK (Wilton, 2014) has proliferated managerial approaches and metrics to assess student outcomes. The emergent Teaching Excellence Framework intends to include graduate 'employment' within their metrics (Office for Students, 2018). Thus, universities have implemented a range of approaches to developing the employability of their students, whether curricular, extra-curricular, or co-curricular. The Department of Law and Criminology at our institution is no exception. This paper will outline a rationale for developing a simulation module for criminology undergraduate students, along with a description of how the module was operationalised. Using summative assessments as a data set, we present findings from a thematic analysis to highlight from students' own perspective, how their employability and skills have been developed as a consequence of undertaking the module. Finally, we present pragmatic recommendations for others who may be contemplating developing such a module within their courses.

2. THIS STUDY

This study has three key aims. First, we provide a context for the development of the simulation module that was created as a consequence of university drivers to embed employability within the curriculum. Second, we present findings from a thematic analysis of summative assessments completed by students relating to their learning, adopting experiential learning approaches, and utilising models of reflection. Finally, we identify 'lessons learned' for this specific module, and for others who may be wishing to implement a similar initiative within their curricula.

2.1 Module Delivery And Rationale

A revised organisational strategy, which required employability to be embedded within the degree, and new QAA benchmarks for the course, provided an ideal opportunity to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Building on the extensive academic expertise within the department (Posner, 2009), this module was developed in partnership with practitioners, recruited via an event held within the department designed to enhance links with practitioners across teaching provision. The module deployed a social constructivist approach to learning whereby students are exposed to communities of practice to shape knowledge (Rust et al, 2005), and utilised six active learning techniques (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005) in order to deliver a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 2009):

- outside speakers - visiting criminal justice professionals
- criminal justice agency student visits
- a reflective student work book
- assessments designed to facilitate student reflection on their own career pathways
- an imaginary case study approach framework for the teaching delivery
- service learning in the form of opportunities for student placements

Practitioners worked collaboratively to develop a detailed, real-world, real-time simulated scenario (Goulette and Denney, 2018; Werth, 2009), taking in all aspects of the criminal justice process, from incident to release from custody. Within the teaching schedule, practitioners delivered lectures and seminars, firstly to provide an overview of their role within the criminal justice system, and secondly to work with students to progress the scenario. This included input from: crime scene investigators, police officers, Crown Prosecution Service, Victim Support, the judiciary, probation officers and prison officers.

The students enrolled on the module were level 6 undergraduate (final year) students studying either single honours criminology, or joint honours with psychology or sociology. Throughout the module, in addition to receiving face to face teaching, students received 'information drops' via the virtual learning environment, timed to be released at any time, day or night. The purpose of this was to reflect the realities of the working environment, whereby incidents may occur at any time.

Students submitted two pieces of summative course work. The second piece of coursework formed the thematic analysis for this study. The assessment required students to select two agencies whose work had been presented in the module and to write a reflective account/consideration of three elements: how the work differed in reality to pre-conceived ideas; what skills are necessary to work as practitioners in the agencies selected, and how skill development can be evidenced. This necessitated a reflective approach being adopted within their assessments (Schon, 1983; Gibbs 1988).

2.2 Thematic Analysis of Assessment Papers

The assessment papers were submitted electronically. Seventy-six documents were retrieved and downloaded for data analysis. Thirteen (17%) documents were from male students and sixty-six documents from female students (83%). This over-represents the gender gap in social studies course nationally (HESA, 2018) but is consistent with gender differentials within our courses over the past five years. The documents were opened, anonymised, given an individual code, and securely stored by the research team.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis was conducted in order to ensure that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know. In this way, a realist method (King and Horrocks, 2010) was adopted, which focuses on reporting experiences, meanings and the reality of the student participants. The assumptions about the nature of the data have been made explicit. The documents analysed are credit-weighted assessment submissions by undergraduate students in the third year of their degree. Whilst this may have impacted on any explicitly negative comments about the delivery of the module, the assessment was designed to encourage the students to reflect on their *own* experience gained during the module and relate this to their own personal and career development, thereby ensuring students writing was focussed on the impacts on them, not module delivery *per se*.

Each member of the research team individually read and identified themes from ten randomly selected assessment submission documents. A checking exercise was then conducted to agree the coding tree to be utilised in NVivo qualitative data analysis software. This acknowledges the active role that researchers play in identifying patterns and themes by selecting those of interest (Taylor and Usher, 2001).

This qualitative approach to analysis did not treat prevalence of a theme as necessarily meaning that the theme is more significant than another theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Prevalence was counted at the level of the data item (i.e. did a theme appear anywhere in each individual document) rather than adopting a content analysis approach (Wilkinson, 2000). Methodologically the themes identified are an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83). The thematic analysis was theoretical or deductive, a top down analysis of the data (Hayes, 1997), driven by the explicit analytical interests of evaluation, which resulted in coding of the data to address the specific research questions.

3 FINDINGS

From the thematic analysis, three main themes were identified which will be discussed in this section: identification of transferable skills; personal growth - empathy and compassion, and identification of future opportunities.

3.1 Transferable Skills

The data contained evidence that students were able to identify some transferable skills (Monks et al, 2009: 78) in the sense that some of the skills identified were of a generic nature which could be transferred to other employment sectors. The key skills identified by students were:

- Good organisational, administrative and observational skills.
- Excellent communication and interpersonal skills.
- A non- judgemental approach and an awareness of diversity issues.
- The ability to work in a team and under pressure.
- Emotional resilience and a sense of humour.

Rust (2016) identifies that the ability of students to articulate such skills acquisition is fundamental to employability, therefore it is worth noting that some student's acknowledged the transferability of the skills they had identified more clearly than others:

"I believe that they will be conducive to any career which I may pursue in the future." (P15)

"I believe it requires someone who understands the importance of confidentiality as well as a commitment to diversity and work well within a team. Saying this though, I think these skills are vital to possess for many jobs today." (P3)

"Over the duration of my time at University and through other activities outside of education I believe I have acquired and begun to develop some of the key skills needed to work in the Criminal Justice System and indeed any other type of job." (P58)

However, as a result of being asked to compare and contrast the skill sets required for two different agencies, student data illustrates that some had begun to actively process and align professional skill-sets required for working in the criminal justice system:

"Similarly to the work of prison officers, I found that compartmentalisation and mental strength of what is seen daily is needed to work in that profession." (P53)

"The necessary skills for a probation officer as similar to those required for prison officers." (P62)

3.2 Personal Growth- Empathy and Compassion

A further observation that can be made from the student reflection data set is that for some students, the personal growth they experienced during engagement with the module had a significant effect on them. For example in terms of the individual student's perceptions regarding developments in their own capacities for empathy, patience and compassion, which resulted in positive-trusting relationships being formed with the people they worked with:

"My role in the prison was a mentor, this meant I was assigned an inmate prior to his release in order to help him get ready for his release and advise him on any issues he may have. Many prisoners I worked with stated how they had found it helpful knowing that they had someone on the outside to help them once they had been released and to help them settle back into life in the community." (P39).

"Volunteering as an out-reach support worker with isolated youths, it is essential to be able to communicate with them in a way that they understand and also be able to listen to and understand them in order to form a relationship which is needed" (P4).

"I feel that over the course of my studies, I have developed a more in depth knowledge around the pains of imprisonment, which has allowed me to express empathy, patience, and compassion when dealing with offenders during my voluntary position at Catch 22" (P46).

"The skills I have acquired recently are those of a better understanding of individuals facing mental health issues, and a less judgemental bias towards problematic individuals. These skills have been acquired from my involvement in volunteering for SOVA and there Appropriate Adult opportunity." (P43).

It is argued that it is important for students to gain the opportunity to gain a realistic understanding of offenders in order to address misperceptions (Hirschinger, Blank and Markowitz, 2007: 69). This is particularly important for the early learning experiences of those who may work with vulnerable groups within the criminal justice sector, who may have experienced issues relating to trauma, substance misuse or mental health. The importance of assisting individuals in moving beyond stereotypes and to view other groups of individuals in a more compassionate manner and assist in diversity-based learning outcomes will be a vital skill in the workplace and is often assessed at recruitment:

"Coming into contact with ex-offenders on several occasions on the course has helped my ability to not judge offenders for their offending behaviour." (P1)

"Before I started studying things such as prisons and crimes my views towards prisons and inmates was very one sided. However now I have learnt more about crimes committed and what prison is like, I feel I could work in this kind of environment and not be as judgemental towards prisoners as what I used to be." (P49)

This situation can be described as indicative of the reported impact of service learning, where exposure to other cultures and groups is considered a form of “transformational learning that may serve as a platform for further growth” (Hirschinger-Blank and Markowitz, 2007: 78). This in turn, may also lead to a future teaching focus on students translating their learning into the behavioural realm of citizen behaviour (Giles and Eyer, 1999:38). Wider Learning, Teaching and Assessment literature indicates the possibility that students may become more tolerant towards others, less punitive and more in support of rehabilitative progress, on exposure to this model of learning experience (Hirschinger-Blank and Markowitz, 2007).

3.3 Identification of Future Opportunities

The student data sample revealed evidence that students moved from reflecting on their skills, to making the shift to basing decisions on their experience of the simulation module, with examples of decisions being made regarding their own future employment options. These self-assessments demonstrate student’s utilising their own reflections on their skills-bases to make these decisions and provide examples of increased self-efficacy about their future directions in terms of employment (Monks et al, 2009: 78):

"I have learnt to be more discriminating, looking behind presenting attitudes of suspects and police officers alike, for the potential causes. Thus, I have a well-grounded basis upon which to base my future career." (P17)

"From my three years at university I have come to the conclusion that the role in the criminal justice system I would most like to work as is a prison officer" (P18)

I wish to work in rehabilitation of drugs and alcohol following my degree in criminology
(P21).

3.4 Research Limitations

As an internally evaluated piece of work, which focuses on one cohort of students in a single site, there are inevitably a number of limitations to this study. The initial research design included a focus group with students, however this was unable to take place due to the timing of the evaluation, which occurred once students had graduated their course. Although the data contained examples of the results of engagement, future studies would benefit from how reflective writing, *i.e. the process by which*, influenced changing viewpoints.

Given the qualitative findings show the significant impacts on students of engagement with this module, it is recommended that future research also entails quantitative data collection. This could include the extent to which any changes in attitudes were identifiable across the student cohort, across different teaching levels and over a number of years of intake. (Monks et al., 2006).

Although the research identified evidence to suggest the module has had effects on attitudes, it is difficult to establish the *extent* to which students were reporting their attitudes being changed as a result of lack of correlating factors. This limitation could be addressed through the collection of base line data (*i.e.* pre-engagement data, along with post-engagement data) in order to provide a robust assessment of the extent to which attitudinal change can be attributed to the module.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering a module such as this requires engagement from staff within the department and excellent links with local agencies. There are a number of significant resource implications to be considered, such as: working collaboratively with professionals to prepare the scenario; coordinating guest lectures and timetabling; preparing for, and attending visits with students; posting scenario updates; developing a workbook which captures scenario content alongside opportunities to articulate learning and reflection. Students also require support to not only 'make sense' of the pedagogy, but the nuances of the case, and how to relate their experiences to being able to write reflectively. However, none of these resource issues are insurmountable with faculty support and dedicated staff. As debates move away from the production of technocratic lists of skills, towards questions of identity and broader attributes, modules such as this provide opportunities to facilitate the transition "from the identity of a student towards that of a graduate worker and citizen" (Artess, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne (2017, p7).

5 CONCLUSION

This research has presented data which demonstrates through students' own words, the impact that studying the module has had on their learning and skills development, underpinned through the utilisation of six active learning techniques: outside speakers in the form of visiting criminal justice professionals; criminal justice agency visits; a reflective student work book; service learning in the form of opportunities for student placements; assessments designed to facilitate student reflection on their own career pathways and an imaginary case study approach-framework for teaching delivery.

This style of delivery provided unique simulated learning opportunities from which students derived a sense of enjoyment, relevance and confidence, along with fulfilling the module learning outcomes. Students recognised the centrality of the challenging choices they had to make, which required the input of their own judgement in the case study assessment design. They gained real-world experience and insights into this sector from their engagement with professionals, site visits and innovative assessment designs. This resulted in enhanced motivation, inspiration and increased interest, alongside engagement in reflective assessments which highlights the realities of enquiry based learning that they have experienced. Students articulated a range of benefits of being taught by professionals from the CJS, which led to an informed understanding of how the CJS works. The experience of the simulation module has impacted on students' perceptions regarding their own

employability and increased self-efficacy about student's future directions in terms of employment.

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