

Early applied experience: helping first-year students to bridge theory-practice gaps

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Synopsis of the case study

This case study reports on a first-year module on developmental and educational psychology, where we have included a volunteering placement in an education setting as part of the required activities. Students are asked to identify and organise an educational volunteering opportunity, which subsequently forms part of their module assessment. The aim of the volunteering is to help them gain valuable experience in education settings which contributes to employability skills and CV development; alongside helping them to build links between theory and practice. The structure of the module, and activities for them to complete in relation to their volunteering, encourage them to reflect on the observations and experiences they have made, and consider how these compare and contrast to psychological theory and research in the field of developmental and educational psychology. This experience at year one is built upon by further (and more extensive) volunteering opportunities in years two and three. These opportunities reflect the progression of students – moving from more descriptive tasks in year one (relating observations to theory) to critically reflective tasks in year three (evaluating a service or provision) - thus enabling the students to gain extensive educational experience, whilst also demonstrating their ability to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom to real-world settings. Not only is this useful for their learning, but also for their ongoing career development when they graduate.

What did you/ the participants do?

As part of a first-year module on a specialist degree in 'Developmental and Educational Psychology', students arrange a minimum of 15 hours volunteering in an educational setting. The range of settings that would be suitable for this can be quite broad, providing learning is taking place in some form. Examples include nursery settings, primary or secondary schools, further education colleges or universities, sports clubs or fitness classes, continuing professional development or training, out of school activities and societies including after school clubs, brownies/scouts, dance and drama groups. Students spend time in these settings observing what is going on, and contributing as appropriate. During the time they are volunteering, classroom sessions for the module take place online, helping students to reflect on things they are observing and consider how they link to relevant psychological theory. Examples include online activities focussing on approaches to learning, behaviour

management, and relationships between learners. When they return to class, students work in groups to prepare a presentation on their experiences. They are encouraged to identify themes arising from their observations within their groups (such as areas of similarity or difference in behaviour management strategies or teaching approaches) and consider the role of context, type of learning taking place, and learner characteristics to help explain some of these themes. In the presentations, groups talk about their volunteering experiences, what patterns or themes have been identified, and how these relate to relevant psychological theory identified through background reading they have carried out. There is also a placement report where students complete an individual assignment reflecting on their own volunteering experience, and how what they observed relates to psychological theory and research.

What happened/is happening as a result?

This is the first year that the module has run this way, as previously it was entirely classroom based. The students have just returned to class following their educational volunteering, and they have all reported finding the experience extremely valuable. They are 'buzzing' with things they have seen, and have plenty to talk about with each other. This has really stimulated group discussions and classroom activities. To help nurture the cross-fertilisation of ideas, and aid the identification of themes and patterns between very diverse settings and experiences, I devised a class activity based on a series of discussion questions about what was observed. Examples included:

- What kind of learning was taking place? What was the evidence that the learners were learning? How engaged were the learners and what factors might have contributed to this?
- What sorts of interactions did you observe between learners, and how did this contribute to their learning? What challenging behaviour did you observe, and how was this handled or dealt with?

Groups were asked to consider each question, and talk in turn about what they had seen in their own volunteering experience. They were then asked to identify, based on everyone's stories, areas of similarity or difference, and consider reasons for these emerging patterns.

Students are currently working on preparing their group presentations and subsequent placement reports, so we will shortly be able to comment on their response to these tasks.

What are your critical reflections?

Finding ways of helping students to develop employability skills during their degree is being increasingly emphasised, and I feel that this example offers one effective way of doing this. Many of the students I teach want to progress into careers in education settings (whether through teaching, child and adolescent mental health services, educational psychology, special educational needs, research or further study) where experience in the field is essential. We have always included volunteering placement opportunities in year two and three, but extending this to first year is new this year.

Feedback from our final year students has been that the placements they have conducted during their degree have been extremely valuable in enabling them to make successful applications for PGCE and teach-first courses, other jobs in education settings, and careers options where experience is needed alongside academic qualification. I have found it valuable for me as a teacher to help students gain experience, and facilitate their abilities to make links between what they are learning in class and what is happening in the 'real world'. You start to see the lights go on! Having said that, there have been some challenges with the organisation of the module. I've needed to embed several deadlines (for placement forms and arrangements, group tasks, etc.) into the module timetable to make sure everyone is on track. Some of the weaker students have struggled to take the initiative to make the necessary arrangements, and have needed a lot of support and encouragement. My experience of running the module this year has highlighted the importance of putting in place guidance, instructions and support very early on so individuals don't fall behind.

What worked/what didn't?

Including the volunteering as a required element has definitely been beneficial for the students, and they have all really enjoyed the experience. They can all see the benefits of getting work experience, and have enjoyed discussing how their observations and experiences relate to the academic knowledge they have been gaining in the classroom. However, there have been some teething problems relating to students finding suitable voluntary placements, and making the necessary arrangements in time (including allowing time for DBS clearances to be processed, if these were needed). This has meant that not all students were doing their voluntary placements at the same time, which made facilitating some of the online exercises and group activities more problematic. In subsequent years, I will be building in more support for this, by encouraging students to start making necessary arrangements much earlier. I will also be engaging the volunteering service at the University (who can support students finding suitable volunteering opportunities) more on the module by inviting a representative to come and speak to the students directly during class. These kinds of developments will, I hope, encourage the students to organise their volunteering much earlier to avoid some of the delays we have encountered this year.

What do you recommend to others as a result of this?

Consider integrating volunteering opportunities into taught courses, forming part of the assessment, to enable students to get valuable work experience, and apply their academic knowledge in relevant settings.