

Placing students at the centre of their own learning: bringing 'Project Management' alive by getting students to research and reflect on their own materials

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Subject Area: Project Management

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This case study has been developed from data gathered through an observation of the teaching component; interviews with the tutor; and student questionnaires and focus groups.

Background

'Project Management for Information Systems' is an elective module for 3rd and 4th year students studying a variety of courses within the Information Systems and Computer Applications Department, University of Portsmouth, including Computer Science and Business Information Technology. The unit is taught during the second semester of the final year and around 60 students attend the weekly 3 hour seminar sessions, held in a flat room with furniture that could be re-arranged for group activities. Approximately 40% of the group are students who have transferred directly into the 3rd year from either overseas undergraduate degrees (about 30%) or HND courses (about 10%).

At the beginning of the unit students are given a support booklet which outlines topics to be covered and possible sources of information. The next topic to be studied is introduced at the end of the seminar and students are expected to study and prepare materials for the following week. At the beginning of each seminar, time is allowed in groups to discuss the information gathered and to raise any questions which are then answered during the seminar.

The unit is designed to encourage student-centered learning. The seminar is an interactive session with the tutor providing short inputs to the whole class and asking questions of the groups to gain feedback from the students on their understanding. Important aspects of the work are highlighted by students being asked to discuss a topic in small groups and, where necessary, drafting questions for the tutor. Material is often related to previous learning and real world scenarios by the tutor and students are expected to take notes on both the factual information gained from the seminar and their own learning experiences. Time is also taken to discuss learning strategies and to remind students that they are in charge of their own learning.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

The department felt that this module should be taught by someone with industrial experience of Project Management and appointed George Allan to deliver the module. After presenting the materials through lectures, the tutor felt the exam and coursework responses from tutees were disappointing, "it was obvious they hadn't understood some of the principles which I had been lecturing" and students were failing the module. "Project Management itself in real life, when its applied, is all about mixing with people and problem solving" and the tutor felt that "it would be better for them to have an enquiry based course, because that is what real Project Management is all about."

Learning opportunities are now so open for students that it is difficult to make assumptions about previous knowledge and because this unit is enquiry based each student can learn according to their own abilities. The tutor says "...in many ways student-centred learning overcomes the difficulty of incompatible levels".

Students' perspective

Overall the students who returned questionnaires felt the weekly seminars helped them understand Project Management and that completing the activities helped to increase their depth of understanding. Completing topic studies before each seminar was seen as effective and learning in this way increased students' motivation to learn.

"Time management", "critical evaluation and thinking" and "communication" were most commonly listed as the skills students saw the unit aiming to develop. Strengths of the module included "increased communication with the tutor" and "integration with other students and listening to wider opinions". Students within the focus group also liked knowing what the topic would be the following week and felt they had a clear "set of objectives to work to". All the students in the focus group would have preferred the module to have featured earlier in their course as lessons learnt about independent research, planning and project management could have been applied to other units and pieces of coursework. Overall students found the discussions in groups helpful but highlighted that this only worked well if individuals had done the work. Some students felt that this method provided an opportunity to catch up when work had not been completed or to resolve issues with more challenging topics, and some felt let down by individuals who had not completed the tasks. "There is a danger of being in a group where you miss out" whilst others hoped that those with ideas to share would "say it out loud so everyone can benefit".

The tutor was seen as "enthusiastic about the subject" and students commented that "his enthusiasm rubs off on you". Material was put across "in a way that we can understand" and students felt that the tutor's experience in industry and continued interest in new developments added to the learning experience.

Issues

Initially there can be cultural issues for students not used to interacting with the tutor or who feel uncomfortable with peer discussions. However this is overcome with time and increased understanding and confidence. One student who took part in the focus group felt that the pace of the seminar was sometimes a barrier to individuals contributing to the discussions. Although the tutor recommends a maximum of 10 to 15 hours study time for this unit some students felt the unit was "time consuming".

Benefits

The method of delivery motivates students by asking them to investigate a topic and, with guidance, discover a wealth of materials and information. Students gain confidence in their research skills as they discover that their peers have found the same materials and are interested to learn from other opinions on the subject.

"You are not consciously thinking about all this extra effort you are having to put in, you just do it."

Reflections

Different levels of students require different approaches to the introduction of student centred learning and different amounts of guidance. First year undergraduate students require more focussed, short-term tasks, whereas topics for postgraduate students can be broader. "A tutor does need some experience to pitch it at the right level".

Some students saw the module more than teaching Project Management and also being about "learning" and "recognising what you can apply and when to apply them"
"I'm thoroughly enjoying it!"

"Seminars well run, good way to learn through participation ... other units should be more like this."

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