



PERSPECTIVES ON: AUTHENTIC LEARNING WITH LARGE STUDENT GROUPS

Enquiring into the ‘Management Enquiry’

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The '**Perspectives On**' series has been developed as an online resource to promote dissemination and discussion of contemporary issues in the business school sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Enhancing graduate outcomes is an aspiration of all UK universities and their stakeholders. In efforts to enhance graduates' outcomes, to develop their career-readiness, universities are exploring new approaches to equipping students with the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours sought by employers.

This thought piece contributes to the discussion around authentic learning experiences for undergraduate students as an approach to heightening career-readiness. Specifically, it focuses upon how these pedagogic approaches might be effectively employed within large business schools for students opting not to take placements or internships where these are not compulsory on their programme of study. Drawing upon our own experiences, we discern that, while many students perceive authentic learning opportunities positively, for some students this is not so and this has NSS/student evaluation implications. We conclude this paper with a series of questions over which we would be delighted to engage in dialogue with others in order to help us to better understand the potential of, and perceived values of, authentic learning.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: THE 'DESIRED' OBJECTIVE

Business schools have faced significant criticism for failing to meet government and employers' demands to develop students' career-readiness. This critique has intensified in recent years from students themselves who, in paying over £9,000 per year, expect a certain return-on-investment through a clear route to a successful graduate career. Of course, these expectations are mirrored by the multiple performance measures that characterise higher education, notably 'Graduate outcomes' which, as an important proxy measure for university education value, inform TEF, league tables and other such metrics. This climate has brought to the fore the policy rhetoric of graduate "employability skills".

The concept of "employability skills" has though been subject to much debate. In comprising multiple definitions and explanations, conclusions have thus been drawn that the concept comprises everything and yet nothing (e.g. Smith, Ferns and Russell, 2014).

For conceptual simplicity, we define "employability skills" as those skills and personal attributes that are considered by employers to be important for graduates to develop in order to be "profession-ready" (Zegwaard Campbell, & Pretti, 2017), that is, to secure and sustain employment (Bridgstock, 2017; CMI, 2018). These skills and attributes are not merely technical, whether generic and/or discipline-specific, but also comprise non-technical aspects best enhanced through work practice, such as development of identity (Bridgstock, 2017) and of human capital through, for example, cultivating networks (Zegwaard, et al., 2017).

While CMI (2018) report that “eighty-nine per cent of employers believe that embedding work experience within the curriculum would help to make students more employable” (p.8), they also note that only 25% of students take up a placement or internship where these are offered, with this offer being available on only 22% of university programmes. Alternative sources for development of these skills/attributes, to mimic actual workplace practice, have therefore been sought by higher education educators.

One of the most prominent steps taken in recent years to address students’ development of these necessary employability skills through the curriculum has been the introduction of ‘authentic learning’. ‘Authentic learning’ creates a learning environment in which the focus is upon real-world practice-based challenges to which students apply their developing theoretical knowledge and understanding (e.g. Lombardi, 2007). The assumption is that through developing skills and knowledge in the context of practice so students will better develop a “business-ready mindset” (CMI, 2018, p.5) to meet employers’ expectations.

This paper does not intend to provide a comprehensive review of literature on authentic learning as this has been well-documented elsewhere. However, to provide a context for the exemplar ‘case’ that follows, and to contextualise the discussion, a brief examination of the concept is now provided.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING APPROACHES

Growth of authentic learning within higher education and its value for students’ learning and graduate outcomes

‘Authentic learning’ tends to be considered as a relatively new educational approach. It has though, been manifest within higher education since the 1980s. The development of ‘authentic’ approaches were informed notably by the work of Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) which, foregrounding the premise of ‘learning by doing’, has underpinned the practice of apprenticeship for many hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The 1990s though witnessed notable expansion in authentic learning with Lombardi (2007) distinguishing key elements upon which to base such activities.

These key elements, which focus upon developing higher-order thinking skills within a context outside of the academic classroom, include much of what are now termed ‘employability skills’ such as: working with an “ill-defined problem”; necessitating “multiple sources and perspectives”; involving “collaboration” and “reflection” (Lombardi, 2007, pp. 2-4). Contemporary interest in this pedagogy has therefore been largely in response to drives to enhance graduate outcomes (James and Cassidy, 2018) within a context of claims that conventional graduate capabilities will not suffice for their survival in the unpredictable, ambiguous and complex environment of ill-defined problems that faces them. Accordingly, students are provided with the opportunity to “rehearse for the complex ambiguities of the game of adult and professional life” (Kaider et al., 2017, p.155) through

practising their critical engagement with challenges through the experience of real-world problem-solving (Lombardi, 2007).

THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE, OF LEARNING

An approach that advances real-world problem-solving is though incongruous with conventional schooling and education which have been organised around a model that relies on explicit propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is developed, “acquired” (e.g. Sfard, 1998), through learners learning principles and theorems from ‘experts’. This equips them with a knowledge of practice. Such knowledge can be stored, represented, codified, transferred and retrieved for use as/when required, for example, by students within their assignments.

Significantly, propositional knowledge does not though provide the necessary knowledge for practice. Much of this for practice knowledge is tacit, nuanced and highly situational and cannot simply be ‘acquired’ merely through listening to an expert or reading a textbook. As a result, as Gosling and Mintzberg (2006, p.419) assert, much management education provides only out-of-context “abstractions and generalisations” with “little practical utility”, leaving students ill-equipped to deal with the contemporary business world they will face.

Authentic learning is underpinned by the notion that ‘learning by doing’, situated in context, is fundamental to effective future practice (e.g. Brown, et al, 1989). From this perspective, learning is considered to be intrinsic to human activity, as a process of meaningful participation in ongoing social and cultural practices, with which it is mutually constituent (e.g. Sfard, 1998). What is known is expressed in an individual’s ability to competently participate within a context to which they become increasingly encultured (e.g. Brown, et al, 1989). For our students this suggests that fostering their effectiveness as future business leaders, for becoming practice-ready, necessitates them developing their knowledge and understanding, and importantly their identity, within the context of practice, rather than merely within the university classroom.

AUTHENTIC LEARNING AND THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

Placements, internships and industry-based learning opportunities are a natural home for authentic learning. However, due to a relatively low take-up by business students (CMI, 2018), compounded by the increasing competition to secure placements, other learning methods and activities that aim to mirror the workplace have been developed. Although an array of authentic approaches has been devised, its application within the contemporary business school typically centres upon the use of business simulation software and such-like higher cost activities. These simulations provide students with opportunities to develop some key employability skills, however, significantly, they don’t provide students with direct exposure to the complexities and irrationality of relationships and politics within organisations, nor do they offer students the opportunity to develop their networks,

negotiation skills etc. Therefore, there is a strategic need for business schools to do more, to adopt more innovative approaches to enhance their graduates' employability outcomes.

AN AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCE: THE CASE OF THE 'MANAGEMENT ENQUIRY'

At Newcastle Business School we have addressed this challenge of preparing our students for employment and future employability, through the development of an experiential learning thread that runs through the undergraduate degree framework. While it cannot be doubted that work-integrated learning provides the best authentic learning opportunity, for those students choosing not to, or that are unable to, take a placement or internship within this curriculum thread we have developed a final year undergraduate year-long capstone module, individual, Management Enquiry (ME). This optional module sits alongside the team-based Consultancy project and replaces the conventional Dissertation.

The module is designed with employability at the centre of the design rather than being retrospectively mapped. It takes what Kaider et al.'s typology (2017) would refer to as a 'medium-high authenticity, medium proximity' approach (medium-high level of task authenticity and medium proximity to the workplace). Drawing upon clients from our Business Clinic and other networks, students engage with organisations, through a conversation with a workplace manager or professional, to identify an issue, question or challenge facing that organisation's practice. Students subsequently investigate this issue/question/challenge, guided by a supervisor-as-coach, to make practice-recommendations that take into consideration the resource implications and internal politics and power bases.

Institutional ethical approval processes can though create quite a hurdle for undertaking empirical work with students. Within the ME we have a two-stage ethics protocol. The initial conversation with a manager/professional does not generate data. Its purpose is merely to identify key areas of interest, concern or challenge. Importantly, this conversation is not an interview and students are briefed that they may not take detailed notes during it. To verify the conversation having taken place, students submit a visualisation, such as a mind map, of key topics that were discussed. This visualisation is signed by, or supported by an email from, the manager/professional concerned. Prior to undertaking their empirical study within the chosen organisation/s students submit for full ethical approval using the University's ethical submissions procedure.

As well as documenting their Enquiry data collection/generation methods and acknowledgement of any potential risks, this application necessitates the students providing supporting organisational consent and a copy of the individual consent form that they will provide to participants. Students that fail to secure ethical approval prior to collecting/generating data are penalised in their final submission and, should the methods used present an ethical risk, are called to an academic misconduct panel. The same penalty of academic misconduct applies to students that generate data through recording the initial conversation.

Students are assessed upon their submission of two documents. Firstly, they submit a briefing document written for a manager audience which outlines their Enquiry, a rationale for it supported by a review of relevant practitioner and academic literature (3,500 words, submitted at the end of month four). Later they submit a management report detailing their findings, conclusions and importantly their resourced action-plan of key recommendations (6,500 words, submitted early in month eight). This assessment approach affords sufficient parity with the traditional 10,000 words Dissertation while also embracing approaches characteristic of a more authentic learning experience.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON THE MANAGEMENT ENQUIRY

In its first year (2018/19), around 300 of c.870 students opted to take the ME, many being dissuaded from a team-based Consultancy Project due to the high-stakes involved of working as a member of a student-team. Some students selecting the ME had taken a placement but valued undertaking a practice-based enquiry over an academic research Dissertation.

Enquiries that the students have undertaken are wide ranging both in terms of topic but also in terms of the type of organisations they engaged with, from small entrepreneurial SMEs through to large MNCs as well as with the public sector. A number of the students were able to locate and engage with an organisation through their own networks, while others drew upon clients from the Business Clinic and other local networks. Examples of the ME undertaken by students are provided in Table 1.

Student feedback was largely positive, with the module securing 88% satisfaction. Performance was above average, the average grade being 60%, with 54% of students securing a grade of over 60% and only 12% failing the module. However, more significantly, in embracing the challenges in working with an organisation such as the consequences of revoked access, the withholding of key data, other organisational politics, so students have developed such skills as: negotiation; independent decision-making; capacity for professional judgement; a sense of ethical and social responsibility. This has, we argue, engendered a far more holistic learning and enabled learning of skills/capabilities that are otherwise typically very difficult to measure or even distinguish.

Some students have been able to explicitly utilise their learning from these experiences productively in other academic, workplace or graduate recruitment activities, while also demonstrating their heightened awareness of, and understanding of, current industry-practice concerns. For example, a student seeking a graduate post was able to use her growing grasp of the hospitality sector, and data that she had generated through her ME, to make a convincing, successful selection event presentation. Similarly, a logistics student exploring perceptions of JIT with Jaguar-Land Rover has used his enhanced industry understanding to secure a post within the auto-industry. However, is such learning only realised by those students that engage in self-initiated reflection as it is through reflection that such learning is maximised?

CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS THAT HAVE ARISEN THROUGH THE ADOPTION OF AN AUTHENTIC LEARNING APPROACH

While for the majority of students the ME has presented a positive learning experience, for some students this has not been the case. As a result, questions have arisen for us over which we seek dialogue with others interested in, or already using, more authentic learning approaches. These questions are as follows:

1. How, within a final capstone module, might we promote greater reflective opportunity as it is through reflection that learning is maximised?
2. Some academic colleagues have perceived the module to be of lesser value, citing a lack of academic rigour as the Enquiry is initiated by practice and not by academic theory or research evidence. These colleagues have asserted, we would argue mistakenly, that this route has lesser credibility than a Dissertation in the eyes of graduate employers. How can we convince these 'pure research' academic colleagues of the value of the Management Enquiry and therefore secure their buy-in and support?
3. A minority of students engaged with the year-long module only around one month from submission. They then reacted to their realisation that this was insufficient time to complete the work by blaming the School for a lack of workplace practitioner access and demanding disproportionate support. How do we encourage students to engage with a year-long module sufficiently early for them to develop and then reap the potential employability benefits that this would offer them?
4. Is our assessment mechanism of a management briefing document and a report really authentic? If we were to use, for example, a poster as a key output replacing the final report, how do we ensure students do not see this as an easy option and thereby miss the higher-level evaluation and analysis necessary? Also how do we ensure that a poster, for example, is perceived credibly by our research-focused colleagues for whom such an output might be considered to have lesser credibility than a full written report?
5. Reports have suggested that students have little recognition of transferrable skills and that merely telling them of this skill development has little impact. How then can we ensure that students recognise the direct relevance and value of the ME for their future career rather than viewing it as just another assignment and another hoop to jump through?
6. (How) Can we ensure parity of standards given the variance in complexity of the real-world management problems that students are tackling? For example, some students examine a straightforward operational issue, whereas others examine a multi-faced, strategic and systemic issue.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the nature of knowledge, of learning and of authentic approaches to enhancing students' learning for their future employability have been examined. The benefits, but also the challenges, of adopting their specific approach to authentic learning have been highlighted.

It is hoped that this paper will both act as a guide for academics looking to develop authentic approaches within their curriculum, but importantly, engender discussion and debate around the place of authentic learning and of specific approaches to it within large student groups.

The author looks forward to engaging in such discussion and would welcome future research collaborations on this specific educational approach but also upon other authentic approaches to education within large business schools.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Example ME projects undertaken in 2018/19

Issue/concern identified through initial conversation	Enquiry focus	Organisation type	Students' programme of study
Difficulties local entrepreneurs face in engaging with potential customers via social media	How do entrepreneurs use social media? Is it to promote the self-brand or their company-brand?	Entrepreneurs and SMEs	Marketing Management
An ageing population and skill shortages are resulting in recruitment and selection challenges within the regions' logistics firms	Examining perceived necessary changes to recruitment and selection procedures of logistics firms based in the region in the context of an ageing labour supply due to the skills shortages of younger applicants	International logistics companies located within the region	Business with HRM
High labour turnover causing escalating recruitment costs	Why do employees see their jobs as short-term?	High Street mobile phone retailer	HRM
High numbers of young workers in the hospitality industry causing low staff engagement and retention	Why do younger workers opt to work within the hospitality industry on only a short-term basis?	Hotel within a large multinational hotel chain	Business with Tourism
Will global outsourcing and associated cultural and language differences impact performance management systems?	How do the HR team consider cultural and language differences will affect performance management systems employed in outsourcing?	UK High Street Bank	International Business Management
How technological development is changing the way universities must market themselves to attract students	How do students engage with university marketing tactics/strategies?	UK Universities	Marketing Management

Retaining volunteers within the events sector in the region	Examining what influences events volunteers to stay with the organisation	Regional events volunteers	Travel and Tourism Management
Declining rural pub performance in the region	What is the long-term prognosis for rural pubs in the region?: The perceptions of these rural pub managers	Pub managers within the local region	Business with Economics
Low customer adoption rates of mobile banking services faced by a High Street bank	The challenges customers face in adopting mobile banking services	UK High Street bank	Accounting and Finance
Student property services' struggle to hit occupancy targets within the city	Investigating the decision-making of students as potential tenants in an evolving and fast-growing student property market	National student property company	Business with Economics
The impact of new technology on the Accounting sector	How do Accountants perceive AI impact will impact their profession?	Chartered Accountants within the region	Accounting and Finance
The perceived benefits of new tax accounting technology on businesses	Examining how family-run restaurant owners consider that innovation in tax software will help them to avoid unanticipated tax penalties and thereby their financial success	Family-run restaurants within the city	Accounting