

Transferable skills - the employer-student dichotomy

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Abstract

There is an increasing expectation that higher education ought to prepare graduates for the workplace (BIS, 2015). However, more than half of employers cite a lack of soft skills, particularly team work and communication, as a prime reason for a lack of preparedness for employment (BCC, 2016). Skill development can be integrated into a number of curriculum activities and aligning this with assessment can ensure that students get feedback on aptitude and ability. Collaborative assignments can enable the acquisition of these in-demand transferable skills (O'Shea & Fawns, 2017) however, these forms of assessment are not favoured by students (Machemer & Crawford, 2007) who instead prefer written coursework (Bartram & Bailey, 2010). Academics' learning activity choices may now be driven by the increased emphasis being placed on student satisfaction (Bevitt, 2015) thus limiting the range of soft skill development that students gain feedback on. This paper specifically explores staff experiences of engaging students in assessed group work and how the emerging narrative exposes the disparate views of students and employers regarding graduate skill sets.

Introduction

Many students choose their degree programme on the basis of the perceived graduate job it will confer (Nicoll, 2016; UUK, 2013). Therefore, before the student enrolls at university they have a set of expectations about what they will achieve. Students are a key stakeholder in the modern Higher Education setting (Bevitt, 2015) with their survey outputs and satisfaction ratings being used to compute scores for league tables. This can ultimately impact on the financial health and therefore sustainability of departments or more broadly, the institution. The employability expectation comes not just from students, industry are also a significant stakeholder and politicians have been an instrumental force in driving discussions (and now metrics) around the graduate workforce (BIS, 2015; Nixon, Scullion & Hearn, 2016). This has led to several key debates regarding graduate-readiness with universities increasingly being tasked to consider the skills that the 21st century graduate should possess (Stewart, Wall & Marciniak, 2016; BIS, 2015). Employers state that while subject and associated technological knowledge are of importance - their significance for the current employment context, is equal to that of the possession of soft or transferable skills (Stewart et al., 2016). Communication across a range of media and the capacity to collaborate and operate within a team setting are considered core attributes (Isherwood, 2018) for the uncertainties that the modern workplace can present (Kreber, 2017).

This however, raises questions regarding whether it should be the role of the university to teach these skills (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009) and if so, where they should be placed within the curriculum (Cranmer, 2006). Indeed, some discussion also centres on whether the development of these assets should be embedded or extra-curricular and who should deliver them - academics, practitioners or professional services. Concerns can also be raised, if in-curricula, about knowledge content being traded off for soft skill development though some would argue that the two can co-exist (Nesi & Gardner, 2006).

The ability for students to work as a team member is often tested within the higher education sector by assessing group work (O'Shea & Fawns, 2017; Isherwood, 2018). This however,

can generate tension within teams because of personal characteristics and commitment issues, and the impact of these, if a group rather than an individual grade is awarded (Gibbs, 2009; Smith & Rogers, 2014). A narrative around 'social loafing' can also emerge (Ying, Li, Jiang, Peng & Lin, 2014; Tan & Tan, 2008). However, the key characteristics of an effective group is that there is a staged process toward productivity involving norming and storming pre-performing (Tuckman, 1965) and therefore exposure to this reality of group contexts prepares students for the world of employment.

The study documented here more broadly examined staff experiences of introducing 'alternate'/'innovative' assessments in the curriculum. Many of the drivers for these new approaches had been to enhance the students' skill sets conscious of the employability agenda. However, this current report will focus on the specific dialogue that emerged around group work and the potential for conflict between the demands of two key stakeholders, students and employers.

Method

Subsequent to ethics approval, staff within one of the faculties who had introduced 'more novel' assessment modes (within the two previous academic sessions) were approached and invited to become research participants. Four staff members volunteered to be part of the study and had university teaching experience ranging from 2-30 years. A set of questions relating to drivers for their chosen format, implementation and student response to the assessment were posed by e-mail with the staff member invited to a follow-up interview. Responses were transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Assessment can be defined as adjudicating on achievement (CED, 2018). In the case of education, this can pertain to the amount of learning that has taken place and is usually benchmarked against a pre-set list of expectations (learning outcomes). Assessment in higher education is also about enabling the student to make judgements (Boud, 2017). The four participants spoke of aiming to constructively align their assessment briefs to the intended learning outcomes (Biggs, 2013) but mentioned challenging feedback that they had received from students.

All were keen to engage students through alternate assessment methodologies, and advance a broader skill set, specifically one which would prepare students for future work. Group work involved a range of media and assignment modes. For example, assessed debates curated in class using collaborative working software and in an online discussion board; an online wiki; a group poster; a health promotion toolkit. The predominant themes that emerged from the survey responses and transcripts related to prior exposure and student satisfaction.

Prior Exposure

All of the participants acknowledged the employability agenda and a desire to enhance the work readiness of their graduates (BIS, 2015), conscious of the political and institutional expectations in this area. However, some expressed frustration that despite students being keen to be employable on completion of their studies (Nicoll, 2016) they were less than enthusiastic to engage with media that would develop one of the key attributes that employers were requesting – namely, the capacity to work as a member of a team. Group work enhances students' co-operative skills as well as increasing self-awareness of how as

an individual they work within a group setting (another valuable employability attribute) (Isherwood, 2018).

Participants also articulated positive feedback from students (though tempered by the normal frustrations of group work - that is, equivalence of contribution (Gibbs, 2009)). However, if students were introduced to group work late in their academic career then participants reported less favourable student commentary:

'we've never had to do anything like this before' (Subject 3)

'my other lecturers don't ask me to do this' (Subject 1)

'I've had students say 'it's not fair that we have to do this in our final year this is going to impact on my grade point average'' (Subjects 3 and 4)

The participants commented that because the students were not getting early experiences of assessed group work the relevance or merit of this assignment format was lost. Staff felt that they had to justify the employability aspects to counter student concerns about jeopardising their grade profile. It could be argued that university is unable to truly simulate the realities of a workplace team therefore, assignments which try to mimic this are futile (Molesworth et al, 2009). While some would acknowledge that simulation is not a substitution for real world; relating to others, delegating and organising tasks, the conflict and challenges that group work assessments bring enable students to problem-solve and to articulate how they work in a collaborative setting (including overcoming difficulties) (Isherwood, 2018).

Subject 4 was engaged in preparing students for vocational settings and commented:

'Capacity to negotiate, to work as part of a team and to go through the 'norming', storming', 'performing' stages are critical skills for those who will enter professional employment. We don't always get to choose our work colleagues so students need to learn to work collaboratively to a common goal'.

Therefore exposing students to the reality that teamwork is not always straightforward, that people have to learn to work as a collective and that this may take time and negotiation (Tuckman, 1965), can be a good life lesson.

Student satisfaction

Participants also intimated concerns about the narratives that shape modern higher education delivery, particularly in relation to the significance given to student feedback.

'I feel that the student voice is now much louder than that of the staff and that the National Student Survey drives how we teach and assess' (Subject 3).

'I have to justify every single decision I make to the whole class otherwise the module would collapse' (Subject 1).

Subjects already reflected on their teaching practice, encapsulating student feedback in this process, and acknowledged that there have been occasions where things could have gone smoother. However, they voiced irritation around the student as 'customer' rhetoric

(Molesworth et al., 2009; Boden & Nedeva, 2010) and felt that the benefits derived from exposure to a diversity of assessment modes (including group work) could '*potentially be lost due to risk averse teaching practices*' and instead be '*outweighed by league table results and comments*' (Subject 4).

The role of managers in stemming this was considered of key importance:

'In the first year when I trialled an alternate assessment format, I know that several of the students went to the Head of School and complained saying 'you can't let her do this to us'. I know that she responded by telling them that she had whole-heartedly approved the assessment format as it was designed to develop the skills and attributes that graduates were expected to be able to demonstrate' (Subject 1).

'I am pleased that I am encouraged to innovate in my assessments and try alternate means of engaging the students' (Subject 3).

A view voiced by Pegg (2013) and Smith (2012) who articulate that support is vital for colleagues if they are to avoid feeling '*exposed*' or '*guilty*' (Subject 4) for engaging in what some would view as '*risk taking*' (Johnson & Rose, 2015). However, the purpose of higher education is to challenge students' mindsets and to expose them to uncertainty and alternate viewpoints. Therefore it could be mooted that acquiescing to student demand and going for a narrower assessment palate, one where written coursework predominates (students preferred mode (Machemer & Crawford, 2007; van de Watering, Gijbels, Dochy & van der Rijt, 2008; Bartram & Bailey, 2010)) could result in a loss of the values on which higher education was founded (Barnett, 1990; Perkin, 2007).

Conclusion

The modern lecturer has to navigate the space that can put employers' demands in conflict with student expectations. Therefore key to managing this and trying to achieve satisfaction for all parties is ensuring that assignments that examine transferable skills are always purposeful (Bevitt, 2015) and if group work is assessed that issues of grading (process versus product (Sharp, 2006) or individual versus group effort (Gibbs, 2009)) are considered and clearly articulated to the students. Graduates can state that they wish they had been more engaged with an aspect of alternate assessment because the skillset has been invaluable (Cameron, Wharton and Scally, 2018) – however, they are often unable to articulate the true benefit until they are in the workplace. This post-graduation realisation unfortunately does not get captured in student satisfaction measures. Therefore, engaging students as partners in the learning process (Healy, Flint & Harrington, 2014) and the employability agenda is essential if they are to truly appreciate what the lecturer is aiming to achieve (O'Rourke, 2013) without a sense of '*benign paternalism*' emerging (Healy et al., 2014).

Limitations

It is acknowledged that only a small pool of staff from a single institution were recruited and that the data presented here is a subset of responses from a broader '*innovating in assessment*' study. Therefore, assertions cannot necessarily be more broadly generalised.

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