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The foundation of Business Education is the same as every other discipline within education. As educators, we aim to develop critical thinking, inspire students to explore new concepts and encourage them to be responsible citizens who will lead future generations. However, each discipline, or group of disciplines, are inevitably faced with their own unique challenges. In addition to the general aims of Higher Education, Business Educators are tasked with inspiring the minds of future business leaders. This includes the complexity of understanding the functional areas that operate within a range of organisations as well as linking students' future roles and influence to the social responsibilities that we all have, in other words, to become responsible business leaders.

Discussing good practice is essential and it is the only way we can improve the student and educators' experience, and develop our craft to adapt to the new generation of students who are entering our learning environments. Generation Z bring new challenges for us as educators, and learning from each other and drawing on good practice from other disciplines is an essential component in developing the business leaders of the future.

This special edition of Compass evolved from the annual Learning and Teaching Festival within the Business School at the University of Greenwich. The Festival was developed to sharpen our focus on learning and teaching and inspire more people to engage in research and scholarly work in the area of pedagogy. The Festival includes mainly educators from within the school but also includes representation from our Transnational Education partners. It provides a safe place to talk, share the challenges we face and, importantly, explore new and innovative ways to teach business and its related disciplines.

Many of the items within this special edition were presented in the 2019 Festival, such as submissions by Reilly, Luo, Sun and Warren; Robson, and Mogaji. There are also submissions from those external to the event who want to share either their practice within Business Education or how we can learn from approaches in other disciplines, for example Breen, and Krastev; Compton, Jackson and Bruce. We have a selection of thought-provoking opinion pieces, conference reflections, a video, a case study and an article which cover a wide range of issues that are currently important to the world of Business Education. For example, there are a number of submissions that examine how social and cross cultural issues impact the way we teach our subject area and we have a selection of opinions on how we can improve our delivery through innovative approaches such as role play, Guerrilla teaching and DIY exhibitions. This special edition therefore includes a wonderful range of ideas from across the academic community to challenge and inspire us as we take the practice of Business Education forward.

Liz and Dawn.

Dawn Reilly and Elizabeth Warren, Business School, University of Greenwich, February 2020

Extended programmes: widening participation by narrowing content

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Keywords: Business Education, extended programmes, year zero, foundation year, widening participation

In September 2016, the University of Greenwich Business School introduced its first portfolio of extended programmes. The majority of these programmes followed a common initial year, referred to for the remainder of this opinion piece as 'year zero'. The programme design for year zero was intended to launch students on their programme of study by introducing basic academic writing and communication skills, while also including general business-related content. On extended programmes, the benefits of generic foundation years such as year zero include the efficient use of resources. As all students are studying the same modules, it is easier for universities to forward-plan and to run larger lectures than would be possible if each programme had its own year zero with smaller student numbers. The reasons for the Business School's approach to programme design for this new initiative were therefore obvious and logical. There were economies of scale to be had, especially by basing year zero on existing foundation modules already available within the University, as the programmes could be set up relatively swiftly for the initial cohorts. This was very helpful, because, as these students would be recruited through Clearing 2016, there was no clear idea of expected numbers in the early stages of the recruitment cycle. However, in this piece, we argue that a bespoke year zero design, with a focus on a narrower range of subject-specific topics, enhances the experience of the students on our extended programmes and is worth the investment.

The use of the plural 'cohorts' in the previous paragraph is deliberate, as it gets to the nub of the problem we encountered. Whilst, in the early days, we may have referred to all 'extended students' en masse, the students did not see themselves as a single group of 'general business' students. Their programme identities and departments were very important to them. Although the programme structures were set out clearly on the University's website, the students had not anticipated a quasi-generic foundation year plus three years; they had enrolled on to a four-year extended programme commencing with year zero. The students expected programme-specific content from the outset and, from the feedback we received from the first few weeks of term onwards, it became apparent that something had to be done. This opinion piece represents the views of colleagues from three departments within the Business School and demonstrates how we took a united approach to resolving the problem which we all encountered.

Our response was twofold. First, we regarded the feedback as reflecting a serious and immediate problem, which we addressed by adding previously unplanned extra-curricular content into the year. One example was a trading competition in term one. In term two, the department with the highest number of extended students provided four weeks of taught sessions to its students on a programme-specific topic. This content, not assessed, was of a technical nature and attendance was voluntary, but the fact that attendance proved to be excellent demonstrated both that students considered this topic crucial and that they appreciated access to subject-specific content in year zero. Our second response was therefore a complete re-design of the Business School's extended programmes.

With an eye on cost efficiencies, we retained some common modules for all of the School's extended students. However, each department now also offers significant bespoke content during year zero. Students achieve academic skills and familiarisation with the University's support services and systems via a new extended project module, which exposes students – under the guidance of their personal tutor during timetabled project classes – to an academic research opportunity in their chosen discipline. The discipline-specific modules are particularly popular with our extended students and feedback in liaison meetings and via online module surveys suggests that they have had a largely positive experience over the past two years. The results on the online feedback forms changed from very concerning to excellent after the implementation of the design.

During the re-design, the team asked not only 'What do the students want?', but also 'What do the students need?'. Many of the students on our extended programmes join us following disappointing results from A levels or alternative qualifications. To work at a university that embraces widening participation by providing these students with the opportunity to pursue higher education in their chosen field is a privilege and something we should all be proud of, but it also brings a responsibility: The students of course want – and deserve – to study the subjects they have chosen, but it is essential to consider precisely what year zero should include to prepare the students, not only to progress from year zero but also to achieve well in year one when they join the new students who enrol on our three-year programmes. It is the performance of these students in year one (as well as how they compare with their direct-entry peers) that serves as the 'critical test' for extended programmes (Harwood, 2016, p.16). Although the students come to us with lower entry qualifications, we have failed them if they feel they are the weakest students once they enter year one.

Bandura's (1997) theory of 'self-efficacy' emphasises the importance of a student's belief in himself or herself to achieve a certain goal, such as passing year one. Without this, the determination to overcome obstacles and challenges is diminished, making positive achievement less probable. The modules in the new year zero have therefore been designed to expose students to some year one content, thereby affording them a 'foundation' of relevant knowledge, laid in the foundation-type extended year and building confidence about what to expect in future. In this way, we hope to build up perceived self-efficacy for students whose previous level 3 qualifications may have made them question their self-belief. We also include exposure to a range of assessment styles in year zero, including one or two exams (in relevant programmes) where this method of assessment will be used in year one. Introducing exams in this way helps to build self-confidence as students see that they can achieve in an academic context, that they have the skills required to revise for exams and that they are ready to progress to the next stage of their programmes (Pearce *et al*., 2015).

The challenge for students with low entry qualifications is to achieve a good degree, despite their grades at school and college. The challenge for us as educators is to design extended programmes which help students to achieve. Our experience over the past three years suggests that a bespoke year zero design, with a focus on a narrower range of subject-specific topics, has the potential to help us to meet that challenge and therefore merits the additional investment when compared to a generic provision.

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Lecturer passion: a pre-requisite for inspirational teaching

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With reference to the ever-changing landscape within higher education (HE) and the issue of marketplace differentiation, it has been suggested that universities need to prioritise the quality of the overall student experience, including the quality of classroom teaching (Holbeche 2012). Certainly, there exists a substantial body of literature relating to the theme of teaching effectiveness and – notwithstanding conflicting views, varying perspectives and the multi-dimensionality of the construct (Madriaga and Morley 2016) – it is evident that institutions of HE are attempting to address the upskilling of their lecturers through a blend of initiatives. Such initiatives include the provision of internal and external training courses, peer-review schemes and interventions by centralised educational development departments – for example, the provision of formal teaching qualifications such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. In addition, some universities are holding learning and teaching festivals – events designed to provide a forum for discussion of topical learning and teaching themes and to enable the sharing of a range of good practice ideas.

These initiatives are important because a number of student-focused research studies have revealed that students in HE value teaching excellence, citing key qualities that they would like to see their lecturers display, such as enthusiastic delivery, capability, passion, dynamism and the ability to establish rapport (Heffernan *et al.,* 2010; Kandiko and Mawer 2013; Bradley *et al.,* 2015). In addition to the findings from research studies, universities have at their disposal institution-specific data relating to students' evaluation of teaching quality, of which some is anecdotal and some derived from more formal mechanisms, such as individual module evaluations and the National Student Survey. So then, a question arises: with a body of evidence available regarding the quality of teaching that students would like to experience, coupled with clear initiatives to improve the effectiveness of teaching within universities, why do survey results continue to reveal that student concerns over teaching quality persist?

I would argue that the true catalyst for transformational change is the *passion* for teaching which an individual lecturer personally feels. A lecturer's passion for teaching does not in itself equate to inspirational teaching delivery, but it is, arguably, the key driver for change. A lecturer with a genuine passion for teaching will be motivated, continually, to fine-tune and hone her/his craft and to seek to perfect the art of teaching. Without this passion, though lecturers may attend multifarious teacher-training programmes and undertake multiple peer observations, there is no guarantee, at the end of it all, that they will actively apply what they have learned. Interestingly, the findings of one research study into the willingness of lecturers to adopt new teaching methods revealed concerns over a lack of training in this area and a lack of self-confidence in the personal skills-set required (Bennett 2001). This is an important point. Lecturers with a passion for teaching may be more likely to adopt a more self-styled approach to their personal development and actively seek out ways of enhancing their learning over and above the training that the institution provides. In addition, if a lack of self-confidence is fed by a fear of the unknown, lecturers with a passion for teaching may possibly be more inclined to experiment and take risks because they have the desire to find out more about innovative teaching methods and 'lock down' new skills. It could be argued that most lecturers in HE have a passion for their *subject*; however, that passion may manifest itself primarily through dedication to research. I would argue that a passion for subject without a genuine passion for teaching is not enough to achieve inspirational teaching as judged by the student recipients. It should also be remembered that classroom teaching is only one facet – albeit an important one – of students' overall learning experience. Students may also value post-class support and dependable continuing opportunity for student/tutor interaction. Lecturers with a passion for teaching are well-placed to provide this because they will be driven not only by the satisfaction they derive from their classroom 'performance' that is the well-crafted mix of verbal exposition and other learning activities, but also by the eventual learning outcomes for the student. It is the passion for teaching that drives teaching excellence. This is critical, because, in the final analysis, the ability to inspire is the criterion against which lecturer performance will be judged.

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Situating observations as part of a teaching portfolio

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Within higher education (HE), there has long been a debate about how best to conduct and situate observations of teachers in their practice. Added to this, there is the question of what is actually being observed. Lee Shulman (1987, p.20), for example, suggests that *"teachers cannot be adequately assessed by observing their teaching performance without reference to the content being taught"*. Such a sentence, simple as it may seem, essentially contains a loaded term, which is the inherent suggestion that teaching performance is something to be 'assessed'. This paper argues against that on the basis of research carried out in the context of academic English teaching within a business school in a British university setting.

Historically, assessment and appraisal have been key drivers for teacher observation. Recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), coupled with a greater expectation of all practitioners to have higher educational fellowship status. Though each of these is governed by a separate body, educators may feel as if they are under more professional scrutiny than ever before. For many professionals, this is new terrain. It can feel uncomfortable too, particularly as there is more to being an educator than classroom performance alone. Furthermore, the speed of change has added to feelings of unease. Compton (2016) points out that in some institutions there has been no real history of teacher observation, unlike in other educational sectors. Peer observations have been introduced in some institutions, but a question remains as to how constructive or developmental these really are.

Observations, by their very nature, should be developmental (Donaghue, 2003). Pierson and Borthwick (2010, p.130) argue that any successful evaluation of professional development involves *"observing and documenting teacher behaviours 'in the thick' of classroom practice."* Here, we can see the language of development rather than undertones of assessment and appraisal. Additionally, there has been a drive in such studies as Breen (2018) to recognise HE practitioners as educators rather than teachers. Within that study, a group of educators in a business school context had their lessons tracked over a period of time, with developments mapped against participation in a series of workshops related to technology in teaching. Through shifting the focus to personal development rather than performance, these educators were more comfortable with the whole concept of observation. Rather than worrying about being judged, they were comfortable with being given feedback for developmental reasons. The areas that were explored in the observations and subsequent feedback included usage of technological resources and the scaffolding of students in academic skills and discipline-specific knowledge.

As a consequence of this process of observation and tailored feedback, educators became more skilled in using a range of resources in their classrooms. Alongside this, they grew more comfortable with the discipline-specific aspect of teaching students in such areas as Business, Economics and Human Resource Management. The process of observation proved successful because of a focus on development over time rather than a brief snapshot of a single performance in the classroom. This is why I believe that a greater sense of educational development needs to be built into the process of capturing vignettes of what educators consistently do in normal, everyday practice. Such an aspiration, however, may be difficult to attain in reality, unless a holistic approach is taken and the right environment created to facilitate developmental platforms.

At the moment, it can feel as if instruments such as the TEF are geared more towards measuring what people say they do than towards what they actually do in practice. That creates an environment where educators are afraid to let their guard down and so constantly portray their work in glowing terms because it can be professionally damaging not to do so. This has echoes of the way that many online learning projects were portrayed in the early days of technologies' becoming a force within education. There was a fear of admitting any issues, weaknesses or need for improvement, as if to do so were to weaken the whole argument for using technologies in the classroom, especially when a lot of money had been invested. This created a situation where many online projects were, at the outset, portrayed in a singularly glowing light, almost as *"trophies on the mantelpiece"* (Breen, 2007).

Teaching should not fall into the same trap, even in this age of the TEF. When confronted with questioning about their practice, many HE professionals might retreat into a defensive, default position. At its worst, this creates a work environment where everything is based upon surface impressions rather than a purposeful analysis of practice and how it can actually be improved. Such an environment is one where espoused practice outweighs and even contradicts actual practice, as first discussed in Argyris and Schön (1974) within the context of organisational development. When educators feel that they must constantly espouse or portray their practice in the best possible light, a culture then develops of shielding that practice from public view. Such a culture can be overcome by placing a greater emphasis upon the idea of lifelong development and of seeing teaching as part of a *"developmental continuum"* (Richards, 1998, p.48). This can be further assisted by recognition of the fact that being an educator is not limited to classroom performance alone. In this case, that was done by looking at the same time at developments in other areas of practice. Such areas included developments in usage and design of online learning materials.

There are other ways, too, of giving educators a sense that their practice is something more than that of 'lone ranger' in the classroom (Samaras and Gismondi, 1998, p.716). There is a need to help teachers to investigate *"their own practice"* and develop *"the reflective and analytic skills necessary to integrate this into a process of informed professional growth"* (Garton and Richards, 2007, p.8). Much of the literature on teacher development talks about the importance of having a personal philosophy or teaching epistemology and one of the most pertinent is that described by Steve Mann (2005, p.105), who states that teaching is best viewed as *"a continuous process of becoming"* that is part of a journey which *"can never be finished"*. Taking such a philosophy – not just at a personal but also an institutional level – creates an environment where teachers do not feel a need to be the finished article in the classroom and thus afraid to be judged.

However, if the creation of such an environment were straightforward, somebody would have taken the recipe, bottled and mass-produced it by now. Across contexts and continents, this has been a battle for educational developers, teacher developers or whatever term we wish to use for those working in such units. Yet there may already be practices within educational development that can lend themselves to creating a more comfortable environment into which teacher observations can slot. Within the educational development literature, there appears to be a growing emphasis upon the usage of teaching portfolios as a tool for personal development. Perhaps it could even be called a platform for personal development. Within a business school context, this is particularly useful because it involves practitioners' enacting many of the values and ideas we are trying to instil in our students; e.g. *"personal branding"* (Peters, 1997) or employability skills (Paterson, 2018).

Teaching portfolios have been around for a long time, as described in McDonald *et al.* (2016) and are closely allied to the idea of educational developers' portfolios as conceptualised in Wright and Miller (2000). Both of these two very similar types of portfolio owe their origins to the Canadian-born idea of a teaching dossier or dossier d'enseignement (Shore and Caron, 1986). According to Wright (2016), this can serve as *"an internationally recognised means of recording one's profile and narrative as a teacher in higher education"* (McDonald *et al*., 2016). A teaching portfolio, then, is not intended as a means of appraisal or assessment or even to enhance career prospects, but rather as a vehicle for self-analysis, reflection and the building up of a coherent and personalised narrative of our teaching journeys. Presently, there appears to be a greater usage of this concept in the North American context and various examples of such portfolios can be found online - here[1] and here[2].

Significantly, the emphasis here is as much on the personal as on the professional and there are a great many similarities with the way that portfolios and applications are compiled for admission to fellowship of the United Kingdom's Higher Education Academy, now known as 'Advance HE'. These portfolios include endorsements from students and colleagues, lists of courses taught and achievements, as well as instances or snapshots of practice which come together to give a sense of the educator and the person as a whole. Going back to the idea of having a personal philosophy of practice, the professional and the person are inseparable. When we step into the classroom as educators, we do not leave the people we are at the classroom door. My own research into teacher development[3] - in the context of developing technological knowledge as a means of bolstering pedagogic knowledge – revealed that teachers become more confident and more expert in their practice when they draw on their own interests, background knowledge and personal philosophies to shape learning. Emphasising personal aspects and developmental aspects can thus serve to help educators feel more comfortable about the whole process of observations.

When the observation is part of a developmental portfolio, the act of being observed is much more of a partnership than the old-style idea of somebody coming in, sitting at the back of a classroom and ticking off twenty things wrong with the lesson. Although peer observation is one alternative to such a stifling, criticism-inducing environment, there are limits to what these types of intervention can achieve. They may be suitable for initial teacher training courses, but not for the all-round development of educators in today's HE environment, particularly in the versatile and cutting-edge disciplines found within business schools. Looking at this from a Vygotskian perspective, development proceeds not in a straight line

[1] https://oklportfolio.wordpress.com/
[2] https://mytechclassroom.com/teaching-portfolio-examples/
[3] https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/books/10.16997/book13/

but in a spiral. In order for a spark of development to occur, sometimes it is necessary for educators to get guidance from those more expert in specific areas. Thus, in the study of academic English educators, I was, at the outset, more expert in using technologies in teaching. I was able to offer educators a commentary on their practice and ideas for development when observing them as an inside researcher and manager in the language centre of a business school where they worked. By getting such advice purely for reasons of development rather than appraisal, they could then reflect on their practice and integrate new ideas if needed. The philosophy here was that new knowledge or new ideas should not be imparted to educators. Rather, as in Wilson and Berne (1999, p.194), knowledge should be *“activated’* by making everyone equal participants in the learning process.

Admittedly, equality – in the context of observations – can be a vague term. It can even suggest a lack of self-awareness about such issues as agency and power relations. This is why there are so many other aspects of observations that need to be improved in universities and teaching contexts in general before educators can feel confident about the idea of observations as a developmental tool. Some may see the concept of portfolios as just another means of appraising people, of gathering evidence that then gets used for other purposes by some hidden hand, driven by marketisation. Possibly such portfolios could just become another instance of espoused practices outweighing actual practice, another exercise in packing the cabinet with trophies. Again, this is where the climate needs to change. Development is not a competition and observations are not part of some internal league table or – in sporting terms – a one-off knockout competition where someone’s worth as a teacher is decided by their classroom performance on a single day. If development is seen as a team exercise, as a shared activity, then even teaching portfolios are not an individual product. They are the output of a lifetime’s shared journey, a journey of equals jointly trying to navigate the ever-changing HE landscape.

Business schools are ideally placed to take the lead in encouraging this type of developmental climate within HE. For a start, they have to champion the notion that practitioners should not be judged on teaching alone, regardless of language used in the TEF. By recognising people as educators, we can give them a greater sense of value and, by creating a forum for the display of teaching portfolios, we give them a showcase for the full range of their educational achievements. Presently, such portfolios are more commonly used in the North American context, but there is scope for greater usage of them in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, too. Doing this just requires a cultural shift that places value on all aspects of practice, rather than appraising classroom performance alone. By this means, the act of observing a classroom becomes less threatening. Again, the choice of language is important here, because – going back to the work of Argyris and Schön (*op.cit.*) – the way we speak about our environment reveals a great deal about our values. For today’s educators, it is essential that their practice is valued by the institutions they work for and that best practice is shared and celebrated, not simply used for the purposes of TEF ratings. The act of observing teachers and offering feedback on such observations should always be done primarily for the purpose of their educational development.

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Proposing a cross-cultural peer support programme to enhance Chinese direct entry students' academic performance and learning experience

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Keywords: Cross-cultural peer learning, personalised learning, Chinese direct entry students, Business education

Since the recognition that personalised higher education (HE) learning experiences enhance student satisfaction and retention (Keenan 2014), the number of United Kingdom (UK) universities implementing peer support programmes to facilitate personalised learning has been growing rapidly. Personalised learning is learner-centred learning, tailored to an individual's learning needs, abilities and goals (Becket and Brookes, 2012). The adoption of peer-assisted learning (PAL) has been proved to be successful in personalising students' learning experiences and promoting students as active partners in their learning (HEA, 2014). These positive outcomes should encourage us to consider a design which is more culturally inclusive in order to benefit international students.

Continuing innovation undertaken in HE in the UK has always attracted a growing number of international students to study in UK universities. In particular, the number of Chinese students is up by 43% since 2011-2012 (Bolton, 2019). This year alone, applications from China have increased by thirty per cent (Weale, 2019). International students are important stakeholders of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK, their contributions to universities extending beyond the revenue they bring to the international profile of the hosting universities and the strategic alliances with other nations (Alfattal 2016). Needless to say, the learning experience and satisfaction of international students are of importance for universities. However, the support for international students' personalised learning is lacking in UK HEIs.

It is claimed by Bond and Scudamore (2010) that learners from various cultures learn differently, affected by a range of factors including educational experience, age, gender and social status. It is unrealistic to expect formal learning to accommodate the learning needs of each individual student. Therefore, PAL could play a significant role in accommodating students' personalised learning experience.

PAL is not a replacement for professional teaching conducted by lecturers but supplementary learning allowing students to learn in a student community which represents a safe place for them to ask questions and gain confidence (Herrmann-Werner *et al*., 2017). Since active support among status equals leads to the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Topping 2001), it offers academics opportunities to engage and work in partnership with students to enhance their personalised learning experience, ensure their retention and enhance their satisfaction.

Becoming a PAL leader is voluntary for experienced students; leaders are awarded points linked to the university's employability development reward scheme. Students participating in PAL schemes have described their experience: *"rewarding"; "not only gaining real-life transferable skills but also the satisfaction of having an impact on someone else's university life"* (University of Reading); *"settled into the course more quickly"; "really useful and enjoyed the sessions"* (University of Brighton).

PAL programmes have also been highly commended by academic staff from various universities, as they not only result in a higher level of student engagement, but also create both links between year groups and student partnerships with academic and administrative staff (Ody and Carey, 2009).

Chinese direct entry (DE) students would particularly benefit from PAL for two reasons: First, they have been commonly characterised as 'silent', 'collective' learners (Bond and Scudamore, 2010) who have high respect for lecturers in formal learning but are not very verbally responsive to classroom teaching. Peer-to-peer assisted learning would therefore be more effective when they learn from peers in an informal environment. Second, there is a lack of collaborative learning between Chinese DE students and other student groups on UK university campuses. Chinese students often exclude themselves from other student groups owing to weak language skills. They may also be regarded by other student groups as too exclusive, only talking to and being friendly with fellow Chinese students. A cross-cultural peer-to-peer assisted learning programme would mutually enhance students' international experience by enabling learning from each other. A cross-cultural PAL could build a bridge between Chinese students and students from different cultures to the benefit of all, academically and culturally.

Currently, little attention has been paid to PAL programmes aimed at supporting international students' personalised learning on UK-based campuses. Only one trial targeting Chinese students was reported in the Higher Education Academy's 2014 report – it was carried out in China by a small number of second-year students from the University of Leeds during their trip to China (Keenan, 2014).

Although it is important to implement a cross-culture PAL scheme, some potential challenges need to be considered beforehand. First, when students learn from each other in an informal environment, it is important to make sure that the learning is well structured. Second, students need to be motivated to learn from one another – participating in peer-learning without motivation would result only in reduced time for independent learning, with possible adverse impact on academic performance. Third, there are cost implications in setting up the programme and providing training to students.

In conclusion, international students' satisfaction is essential for universities, which can benefit from offering opportunities on personalised learning. Despite the challenges mentioned above, we believe peer-to-peer cross culture PAL could be an effective approach to providing personalised learning for international students. We therefore propose that such peer learning should be initiated at the University of Greenwich Business Faculty and, indeed, all business schools in the UK.

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Creating a pathway to employability in a Business School: developing professional practice through collaboration

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Abstract

Within Business Education, our students study technical skills and gain commercial knowledge which will equip them for their future careers. In addition, our students need to develop the 'soft skills' which employers are looking for when they recruit graduates. To create a pathway to employability, we have used a collaboration between a module leader and a Business School employability consultant to support second year students. We set out how we have included the consultant in planning and delivering specific topics within the module, and in giving formative feedback to students. In this way we have embedded employability skills in the curriculum and built a relational pathway to the Business School's careers support for students.

Keywords: Business Education, collaboration, employability, formative assessment, teamwork

Introduction

This case study describes how we have used collaboration to support second year students studying an accounting degree with an Information Systems (IS) focus in the Business School at the University of Greenwich. Students on business-related programmes are acquiring knowledge and developing skills which are of interest to employers. Here, as IS specialists, much of the students' time is spent in computer labs where they learn technical skills which equip them for their future careers as the graduates of tomorrow. However, the broadening competition for 'talent' in industry means that our employability skills development must deliver on two additional fronts: internally, in order to enhance the student experience; and externally, producing students who have the transferable skills they need in order to be ready for graduate employment opportunities.

Despite the consensus that developing employability skills is important, what constitutes a successful set of 'employability skills' is the subject of considerable discussion and there can be tension around where it should 'fit' in the academic curriculum (Di Pietro, 2017; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2012). Tan and Laswad (2018) argue that employers are increasingly treating soft skills on a par with academic achievement. Their analysis of Australian and New Zealand job advertisements demonstrates that employers value accountants' teamwork and interpersonal skills, including the ability to present and discuss views. The Office for Students (2018: 3) states the following:

> *We want to ensure that students leave their courses with the knowledge, qualifications, skills and attributes that are required by employers, both now and into the future …*

Within an IS degree programme, opportunities to work in teams and to discuss ideas with their peers, thereby increasing students' 'soft' employability skills, can be restricted. To address these potential shortcomings in the programme, the students study a core *Financial Analysis and Professional Practice* single semester module in their second year. The *Financial Analysis* element includes researching corporate information using online sources consistent with their degree's focus on IS; the *Professional Practice* element includes teamwork and presentation skills.

Placement years undertaken by business and management students can have a positive impact on graduate outcomes (Wilton, 2012). However, our students may perceive that there are barriers to applying for placements (Shepherd and Sumner, 2018). For example, students are focussed on their university studies and dealing with assessment deadlines so thinking about placements and completing application forms may not be their priority. Also, students can lack confidence that their application will be successful. Therefore, it is important that we encourage second year students as much as possible in this area and the module provides the opportunity to create a pathway for them to the Business School's employability support service.

Design

The aim of the *Financial Analysis and Professional Practice* module is to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to perform an in-depth evaluation and comparison of a company's performance. Results are presented via a three-stage portfolio of linked assessments: an initial individual report; a group presentation; and a final individual report. The module has approximately 30 to 40 students each year.

In 2018-19 we reviewed the delivery of the module in order to embed employability clearly in the module through content and via meaningful interaction with a representative of the Business School's careers service. To enhance the employability content of this core module, the module leader brought an employability consultant onto the module team. In collaboration, the module leader and consultant planned the schedule for the term. The consultant planned and delivered sessions on teamwork and presentation skills. She also provided formative feedback to students on the group presentations which the students were required to make as part of the assessment structure.

Professional Practice Session 1: Working in a team
This session had immediate relevance for the students because they were starting work on a group presentation. Developing teamwork skills is a complex activity because simply discussing it in abstract results in students presenting idealised versions of teamwork which they do not then experience. The class started with a Mentimeter exercise to establish students' current understanding of what makes a good team and the consultant then discussed their ideas (Figure 1).

Having set up a theoretical context for teamwork, the session moved into a very practical Lego teambuilding exercise. Working with Lego enables teamwork to be experienced without the pressure of required prior knowledge and therefore it creates a more level playing field in the team. The students were given random assortments of bricks and instructed to build 'the tallest tower', using their planning time to communicate and then using minimal communication once building had started. They ignored the second instruction. Once the winner had been announced, there was a discussion about whether their teams had shown the elements that they had collated in Mentimeter and many students acknowledged that they had not. The class asked for a re-run of the exercise and entered into that enthusiastically, driven by the element of competition between groups.

The consultant then discussed with the class how what they had demonstrated during the exercise would have meant that they performed well at an assessment centre, drawing out what employers are looking for. This linked their skills and experience to something which students can be cautious about tackling.

Figure 1: Mentimeter results

<u>*Professional Practice Session 2*: Delivering a successful presentation</u>

This session began with a short PowerPoint introduction to the topic by the employability consultant which provided a real-life demonstration of an effective presentation. Students then worked in their groups to create and tell a short fairy story. Each story was based on three random images provided by the consultant and were abstract, non-culturally dependent and open to multiple interpretations. Choosing this as the vehicle meant that the introduction to the session which talked about what makes a good presentation in theory could be put into immediate practice because it required no input from the *Financial analysis* case study within the module. The students engaged with the task they were given and demonstrated considerable imagination, and teamwork skills, as they tackled the task together.

In the whole class discussion which followed the group presentations, most students used the opportunity to talk to the consultant about their nervousness with interview presentations. However, the well-deserved praise and positive feedback they received from both the module leader and the consultant boosted their confidence. The consultant then talked to the class about placement years and encouraged them to apply.

Formative feedback in the employability office

Our aim was to build a pathway for our students into the Business School Employability Office. This pathway was to be both relational and physical. Conversations with students about their work help to build relationships and therefore the consultant gave verbal feedback to students on their mock presentations before the actual summative assessment presentation sessions with the module leader. The aim of the feedback was not for the consultant to comment on the technical *Financial analysis* content but rather to focus on slide design and the way the group was working together. These conversations enhanced the relationships which had already been built through the consultant's delivery of the teamwork and presentation sessions. The feedback was delivered in scheduled face-to-face group meetings in the Employability Office in order to build a 'physical' bridge to our employability support for students. In their first year, students had been encouraged to visit and engage with the Employability Office within their professional development module. We wanted to remind the students about the location and encourage renewed interaction with the support provided.

Bringing students to the Business School Employability Office to talk about their presentations demonstrated that this was a safe place to go, even if the finished product was not ready to be reviewed. This mirrored the situation for students with incomplete job applications, cover letters and curricula vitae who might be unsure if they could seek help on their drafts from the consultant and her colleagues. The meetings also gave the consultant the opportunity to talk about placement applications in small groups thereby removing the pressure of a one-to-one conversation but still able to focus on the needs and interests of individual students.

Implementation

It was important that the module leader and employability consultant communicated frequently throughout the project and that the students knew that the content delivered by the consultant was an important part of the module and not 'extra-curricular'. The module leader therefore attended the teamwork and presentation skills sessions. The module leader also organised the mock presentation schedule and informed students about their group's appointment. Only one group did not attend this appointment although the student who did attend from that group then accessed employability support and secured a placement so his frustration at the team was mitigated by the longer-term outcome. After the feedback sessions, the consultant briefed the module leader on her conversations with students, identified non-attenders for follow up by the module leader, and referred any questions that had arisen on technical content.

Evaluation and limitations

The way in which we redesigned the delivery of the module in 2018-19 provided a good student experience. 92% of students who completed the end of module online survey agreed that they were satisfied with the teaching on the module and 92% also agreed that the module has helped to enhance the skills and knowledge needed after graduation. One student commented as follows on her experience of bringing the employability consultant into the module:

> *X's input was refreshing (nice to have a break from the academic side) and helpful. She gave good pointers on the presentation. Was nice to meet her as well, as I feel comfortable to go to her to ask for any job application help.*

Benefits from this collaborative approach between the module leader and employability consultant included the opportunity to promote placements within the module facilitating conversations with second year students and giving them encouragement to apply. Reflecting on whether we achieved this aim, we know that several students did go on to apply for placements and some secured a role. Looking ahead, as this cohort moves into the final year of the programme, they can also benefit from the pathway which the module has built to the Business School Employability Office through relationship with a named individual. In addition, it is hoped that students' confidence in their ability to perform well in an area such as giving a presentation where they do not consider themselves strong will help them have the confidence to apply for graduate schemes and graduate roles earlier. This would increase their chances of securing professional roles immediately after graduation.

This case study has set out our experience for the first year of collaborating in this way. Based on student feedback and the module leader's and consultant's observations of the good level of engagement with the module and the employability initiatives within it, we do not propose any major changes in the second year. One point to note however is that there will be a larger number of students on the module next year. This will not cause any major resourcing issues but it is acknowledged that for a very large cohort, the small group feedback on mock presentations might become challenging to arrange. However, the delivery of the whole class sessions on teamwork and presentations by an employability consultant would continue to be possible.

The module in this case study includes *Professional Practice* in its content and this facilitates collaboration with employability colleagues. In the module we were able to promote the transferable skills of working in a team and presenting with confidence in a novel way for business students on a programme with a technical focus. In other modules, the opportunities for collaboration might not be as obvious but where a module includes group work or a presentation, skills which until now might have been introduced by the module team, there can be an opportunity for this type of content to be delivered by colleagues from our careers services. In this way we are able to create pathways for students to employability.

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Guerrilla teaching and DIY exhibitions: How an assault on comfort zones can engage and inspire

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Link to the video: https://vimeo.com/267229645

Abstract

This case study and video show the process and outcomes of a 'flash' briefing to a group of first-year Fashion Promotion students. The surprise collaborative task was presented to the students outside the comfort of their usual lab space and required them to likewise exhibit previously produced 'zines' in a space away from the host institution. With a view to helping students understand how sub-culture artefacts can be exhibited using low-cost, guerrilla marketing strategies, the lecturer drew on some of these same strategies to present the brief. Engagement and participation levels are demonstrably high and the final exhibition is an evident success; the whole experience, we argue, suggests that to challenge norms and to take such risks may well produce positive outcomes. Whilst we believe this case is potentially relevant to anyone interested in higher education pedagogy, the approach is likely to appeal immediately to anyone teaching subjects where promotion is fundamental as well as to those where marketing principles are elemental.

Keywords: Zine, marketing, guerrilla marketing, edupunk, problem-based learning, PBL, situated learning, video, exhibition, promotion

Introduction

A series of fortunate events brought together a Fashion Promotion and UX/UI lecturer at Ravensbourne (a specialist design and digital media University), an academic developer from the University of Greenwich (a comparatively large post-1992 university) and a video producer from Imperial College London. As part of a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCert), the Fashion Promotion lecturer was required to video her taught session then reflect on it. As part of his own research into unorthodox approaches to observation for professional learning in higher education (HE), the academic developer was invited to observe the videoed session. The video producer was, in turn, invited to record the session and the subsequent student exhibition to ensure adequate audio and video quality was achieved in unconventional settings. Whilst it was not originally conceived as a paper, we were all, in our own ways and in terms of our own interests, inspired by the taught session and what the students achieved as a consequence. The account below and the accompanying video illustrate what we feel is an excellent example of the potential of risk-taking and problem-based learning (PBL) inspired by the 'guerrilla' tactics of flash marketing campaigns. Whilst it may be fair to argue that the approach was more likely to have flourished in creative contexts, its application reflects wider acknowledgement that business and marketing educators need to consider how work environments and work practices are foregrounding gaps in students' work-readiness as curricula struggle to keep pace (Ye *et al*., 2017).

Context

First year undergraduates on a Graphic Communication module (part of the BA Fashion Promotion programme) had been producing a 'zine' series. These hand-produced, photocopied and self-published works are associated with subcultures and, in contrast to the computer-mediated work typical on their undergraduate programme, provide a stark counterpoint to polished, high production value publications. As Duncombe (2014, p.6) puts it: *"...scruffy, homemade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic designs."* Whilst the students were aware from the start of the zine production requirement, the lecturer contrived to present them with an additional task. Conventionally this might be labelled a surprise, collaborative, formative assessment. The briefing and task were much more unconventional, however. In line with the sub-culture thread and the ultimate goal of the task, students were invited to join the lecturing team at a creative/artistic space beyond the typical lab or classroom (in this case the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern) and, once there, told that their 'problem' was that they were all part of a creative direction agency and had two weeks to set up and then hold a 'guerrilla/ flash do-it-yourself (DIY) zine exhibition', open to the general public in a suitable location at least a mile from the host institution and on a budget of just £54. The accompanying video shows extracts from both the briefing and exhibition. The narration from the lecturer and one of the students is complemented below by responses to and perceptions of the briefing and exhibition from our positions as the lecturer, an observer and a film-maker.

Guerrilla Teaching

After an observation of her teaching, the PGCert mentor of the Fashion Promotion lecturer at Ravensbourne challenged her to ensure that digitally focused practice did not give students an opportunity to hide behind screens whilst appearing to engage in class-based tasks. This drove her to consider the possibilities of real-world, situated learning opportunities which align closely to the recommendations of Rohm *et al.* (2019) who argue for more problem-based, experiential and skills-oriented approaches to marketing education. Such approaches, when trialled using colonised space for exhibition-like events as an initial part of the first-year zine task, presented unexpected challenges. The physical space of the institution and the way timetabling is managed in some ways discourage situated and problem-based approaches. *"The new Ravensbourne was designed as an institution that would show the way for others. The plan always was that everyone should be flexible about their use of the space."* (Hodges, 2010); nevertheless, it impeded some activities typically associated with promotion events. At Ravensbourne, teaching spaces are shared and classes migrate from one space to another lesson by lesson, meaning that teachers wanting to show physical objects within the class have to transport, arrange, put up and then take down these displays within a single session. What began as an effort to place more value upon non-digital teaching and learning opportunities became a desire to experiment with where the learning happened. The Fashion Promotion lecturer sensed an opportunity to present some of the realities of exhibiting work under such constraints as are experienced in 'real world' contexts, particularly in relation to guerrilla marketing approaches, rather than those – much less relevant – imposed by such internal institutional circumstances as timetabling and room sizes. She therefore asked the class to meet outside of the campus environment to receive a briefing about a 'flash' zine exhibition in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall. The space was chosen because: it connected to the brief in terms of its function as an art gallery; it challenges many of the norms of gallery spaces; and, pragmatically, it is accessible and free to enter.

The outside observer was immediately struck by the similarity of the activity design to the controversial practices of the 'Edupunk' movement, though such an approach was not consciously followed or advocated. The DIY nature of the zines themselves, the deliberate eschewal of both the comfortable and familiar digital and physical spaces and even the punk aesthetic of the venue later chosen by the students echoed the Edupunk challenge to the hegemony of monolithic institutional systems and constrained practices (Wheeler, 2015). The emphasis on personally-defined goals for each individual within the group and the contrast between this and other more traditional teaching and assessment strategies on the programme also located it in this domain (Kamenetz, 2010).

There was, however, a conscious attempt to exploit and raise awareness of guerrilla marketing techniques. This approach is defined by its unconventionality, low costs, creativity and very narrow targeting of potential consumers (Levinson and Godin, 1994). The invitation to the Tate Modern, the raising of anticipation about the purpose of the visit and the big 'reveal' that can be seen at the start of the video all draw on guerrilla marketing techniques, as does the approach that the students were then encouraged to take. Much more evidently deliberate in the pedagogic design of the flash briefing was the social learning conception of PBL. Central to this is that the 'problem' is something that pushes students beyond existing knowledge: it cannot be immediately resolved but requires active investigation by the students working together (Barrett, 2005). This task required core outcomes of a PBL approach: effective problem solving; self-direction; effective collaboration; intrinsic motivation (Hmelo-Silver, 2004) and developing student understanding of specialist knowledge and transferable skills (Barrett and Cashman, 2010). The flash zine exhibition also had value in its connection to contemporary creative practice in industry where independent publishing is challenged by a decline in sales resulting in a diversification of launch strategies and the adoption of experiential marketing tactics. This connection to industry and practical coursework is valued and sought after by students who often take study positions at Ravensbourne for its live briefs and close connections with industry. The approach taken here clearly emphasises what Rohm *et al.* (2019) define as the four essential skills-development areas for workplace-ready marketing students: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills.

The challenge of putting together a temporary exhibition in a short period whilst displaying publications made on the fly (itself a two-week brief) captured the creative minds of the students. Though it was not possible for this to become a portfolio piece for future display, it proved to be of value in the raising of students' confidence and belief in their ability to execute, with little notice, innovative and creative marketing. In this way, the challenge – and course module – had a lasting effect on the students involved.

Guerrillas in the mist: the challenge of filming

In many ways, the off-campus venue of the briefing and the unpredictable location of the exhibition mirror the ephemerality of the zines themselves. The situation drove us to seek a way to challenge this ephemerality, to capture both events and to produce the accompanying video artefact. In its own way, the video is a valuable record, not just for presenting a summary of the approach and its outcomes but also as a way of capturing the essence of a pedagogic approach and the core lessons learned – from both a lecturer and a student perspective.

Media technologies, especially video, have proven to be very powerful tools when it comes to motivating, engaging and/or instructing students. Because of its transformability and transferability, video can open new horizons in teaching and learning (Woolfitt, 2015). In this case, the documentary record provides a point of focus for lecturer reflections, evidence of a successful collaboration and achievement by the students and an artefact to prompt other lecturers and future students to value guerrilla approaches to teaching or self-promotion. In short, video can enhance not only the overall educational experience, but it can also be a very valuable tool for reflection (Cheng and Chau, 2009; Schmid, 2011).

A key challenge around the videoing of the session was to be able to capture the natural essence and feelings of the process without actually interfering or posing any influence on the students or the lecturer. The venue itself assisted with this but also presented a technical challenge. The background noise and activity of other visitors to the Tate Modern and then the exhibition space selected by the students (Rye Wax record shop and club in Peckham, London http://www.ryewax.com/) needed accommodating though it also provided a convenient mask to the filming and enabled the film-maker to blend in. It was also crucial to enable the students to be as natural and comfortable as possible in terms of the presence of a camera and for them to be comfortable discussing in an unfamiliar and comparatively uncomfortable space, so hand-held equipment and only basic video recording techniques were used. After a brief reconnaissance of the locations and by carefully looking into the structure of the lesson, the video producer decided that a handheld, digital, single-lens camera, and a wireless ‘clipper’ microphone would be used. The ability to move freely around the spaces, without compromising the sound quality, allowed him to successfully follow the narration of the lesson, and at the same time to video capture the natural flow of the student experience and interactions. The same clipper microphones were used to capture the lecturer’s reflections *in situ* and this was overlaid in the post-production stage.

Conclusions

This session was not a one-off; nor could it be described as typical of the curriculum design of the degree programme. Nevertheless, its success made us all conscious of what can be gained from taking risks and by donning our coats and escaping the labs and lecture halls. As evidenced from the lecturer comments, student engagement in the video and the exhibition itself, the separation of students from the comfort of the traditional classroom more than achieved the broad goal of enabling students to see beyond the creative activities they had previously been engaged in within an essentially artificial learning context and instead to grasp how their ideas and strategies might shape up in the face of the working world realities of self-publicising and exhibiting on minimal budgets. That collaboration lay at the heart of the activity presented some risk, but even had the whole thing dissolved in acrimony among the participants, opportunities would still have arisen for discussion of the nature of what makes successful collaboration, especially when high rewards might accrue.

Building creative confidence in the student cohort is a goal that defines the whole programme and is something that all the students identified as a key behaviour they wanted to develop when entering the course at the start of this year. Their responses to this one activity indicate to us very clearly that it has gone some way to achieving that aim. In terms of fashion promotion, it is hard to imagine something more professionally valuable to the students than the opportunity to see how they can build relationships with a cultural venue that sells and distributes independent publications. Publication and exhibition are themes revisited throughout the course and this experience provided students with a reminder of opportunities that exist when their individually innovative, artistic and imaginative endeavours are taken out into wider creative communities. In the creative world 'employability' is so much more than demonstrating skills. Increasingly, these new skills are seen as prerequisites in the traditionally less creative programmes undertaken by business and marketing students. Whatever the area of study, this case study illuminates how connections are made and how the levels and mechanisms of promotion, influence and contacts are interconnected. More now than ever before, therefore, to use such guerrilla tactics in your teaching you do not need to be working in a creative field. We believe that the approach could be applied to any discipline, so long as you are willing to risk breaking away from the comfort of the classroom.

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Role play as a teaching method to improve student learning experience of a bachelor degree programme in a transnational context: an action research study

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Abstract

Role play provides additional learning opportunities to students through interaction with other students in classrooms. Modes of delivery in modules for a bachelor degree programme at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool (XJTLU) – a transnational education (TNE) provider – are mainly teacher-led lectures and seminars. In my action research, an intuitive proactive approach was adopted, Kodotchigova's modified role play method. After the role play, a survey with open-ended questions (modified from XJTLU Student Module Feedback Questionnaire) gathered the perceptions of students of the role play on their learning experience. Twenty-five students aged ≥ eighteen years (twenty females and five males) agreed to participate. Eighty per cent of the students reported that role play helped them to learn and seventy-two per cent that role play stimulated their interest in the module's subject. In conclusion, role play was a very useful teaching strategy for helping students to demonstrate, after first learning various theoretical perspectives, practical application to real-life situations. However, role play might not be suitable for all students, as some may prefer it mixed with other teaching strategies in classrooms, particularly in a TNE context.

Keywords: Business education; role play; pedagogical approach; transnational education

Introduction

The world is changing fast and advances in technology have profoundly influenced modes of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Effective teaching methods can help students to think critically and generate enthusiasm for actively engaging in classrooms (Cherif and Somervill, 1995; Wood, 2003). In addition, critical-thinking skills have been regarded as an important tool for the intellectual development of students, especially in a transnational education (TNE) context (Fonseca *et al.*, 2015). However, the main educational focus of most universities local to Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool (XJTLU) is to deliver factual information to students, not to involve them in active learning or improve their ability to think critically. Such traditional modes of learning and teaching can limit students' development of critical-thinking skills and their productivity (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013; Rayner, 2007).

A review of the literature has suggested that learning is a process involving social and peer-to-peer (i.e. student-student) interaction (Hurst *et al.*, 2013). For example, the 'VARK' model of four modes of learning (visual, auditory, reading and kinaesthetic) details how students learn in classrooms (Hawk and Shah, 2007). One teaching technique that can encourage students to participate actively in the classroom is role play (Chan, 2012), a learning technique allowing students to act out adopted roles in simulations of real-life situations. Confucius, a famous Chinese reformer and philosopher once said, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” (Specht and Sandlin, 1991). Role play, in enabling students to interact with each other in the classroom, can therefore provide them with additional learning opportunities.

Role play requires active participation by and motivation from students (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017). A role play activity can help participating students to develop critical-thinking skills and allow them to apply their knowledge by engaging them in various real-life scenarios (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017); deployed by teachers, it proves an effective strategy for nurturing critical thinking among students enrolled in transnational education (TNE).

A review of the literature has shown that role play can help students to apply their knowledge to practice (Chan, 2012; Kodotchigova, 2002; Specht and Sandlin, 1991). For example, role play has been incorporated in business education so that undergraduate and postgraduate students may come to understand business processes. They may also, since they find themselves exposed to alternative interpretations of and explanations for their own and other students’ contributions to the role play, develop the ability to argue cogently. Role play has the additional advantage of facilitating peer-to-peer interaction, associated with such positive learning outcomes for students as social and motivational benefits (Kodotchigova, 2002) and so promote a higher level of cognitive learning. However, role play does not take place spontaneously in classrooms and teachers play a significant part in making it happen.

More and more universities have now combined to offer TNE and, in this century, university staff and students may travel freely from one country to another country (Bovill *et al.*, 2015). TNE may be defined as a higher education study programme in which learners are based in a country different from that of the awarding institution (Knight, 2016) and it may manifest itself as distance learning, branch campuses, collaborative provision or partnerships, some of which may overlap with each other and thus not form a discrete type (Knight, 2016). One example is XJTLU, an international Sino-British joint-venture university between the University of Liverpool (UoL), United Kingdom (UK), and Xi’an Jiaotong University, China. Undergraduate students enrolled in XJTLU are awarded with degrees both from the UoL and XJTLU, while postgraduate students – including doctoral students – receive a UoL degree. In the National Student Survey, the UoL’s overall satisfaction rate was 85%, placing it tenth within the Russell Group. English is used as a teaching language throughout XJTLU modules and classes.

According to the feedback from my module questionnaires and the students I taught, some new teaching strategies, such as role play, were deemed to have improved student learning experience at XJTLU, a TNE provider. Having received this feedback, I therefore reflected upon my own teaching practice – as a step towards enhancing the quality of learning and teaching practice at XJLTU. I decided to use the ‘intuitive proactive’ approach in my action research project, as best suited to my own pedagogical practice. Such an approach could also help me to address my action research questions (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013; Marsh and Roche, 1993).

Methods

Research question

In my project, my primary research question was: How effective was role play as a teaching method for improving students' active learning experience and critical-thinking skills by facilitating peer interaction in a diverse student body within XJTLU (i.e. a TNE context)?

My secondary research question was: How did the students feel and think about the use of role play in classrooms? Did the use of role play improve the students' overall active learning

Procedures

I adopted the modified role play methods of Kodotchigova (2002) for my project. In semester 2 of the academic year 2018-2019, the role play activity took place after a one-hour lecture on the topic of the module in a bachelor degree programme at XJTLU, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China. Importantly, the lecture first provided the knowledge and skills for the students to apply in the role play. Without the lecture, students would have been unable to understand the situation of the role play and the given roles. At the beginning of the role play, students were briefed about the roles and the description of the situation. They were asked to form smaller groups of four or five people and were then given a specific task and role to be completed in fifteen minutes. Having been asked to imagine themselves as the experts in the roles they were assigned, they then played the roles. After the fifteen minutes, each group was asked to present its members ideas and thoughts on the task and role they had played, while the other groups would pose two questions based on the presentation given. This ensured that every student in the group had an equal opportunity to participate in the role play activity. Finally, students were asked to complete an open-ended question survey – modified from the XJTLU Student Module Feedback Questionnaire – in order to collect their perceptions of the effectiveness of role play in improving their learning experience.

To ensure that all students participated in the role play, I had set some ground rules for the students to follow. I had also obtained the ethics approval (Ref. no. 18-03-12) from the XJTLU Ethics Committee prior to the implementation of my project. All the data from students were kept confidential and anonymous.

For the data analysis, qualitative and quantitative data were collected. I applied coding and categorising techniques in order to organise students' perspectives of the role play into different categories and themes. In addition, I used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for the descriptive analysis in my project.

Results

Twenty-five Year 1 students aged ≥ eighteen years (twenty females and five males) agreed to participate in my project. Eighty per cent of them reported that role play had helped them to learn better in classrooms and seventy-two per cent that role play had stimulated their interest in the module's topic that I had taught. Ninety-two per cent reported that I had explained the role play clearly, with an appropriate level of guidance, and a majority (seventy-two per cent) found role play a valuable learning experience and said that it had improved their critical-thinking skills.

Of the twenty-five students, a majority (eighty-eight per cent) provided some written feedback in the questionnaires that enabled me to perform some coding analyses – I categorised the written feedback into different themes. Most of the students (sixty-four per cent) reported that they understood the content of the lecture better after the role play; a majority of the students (sixty-four per cent) found that role play had made the learning in classrooms more interesting and practical; a minority of students (twenty-four per cent) were more active in classrooms when the role play was introduced.

However, a small number of students (twenty per cent) reported that some – but not all – students had been actively involved and suggested that a longer time should be given for the role play. The students also suggested that ***every*** student, instead of each group, should be asked to present her/his ideas and thoughts and that, in addition, alternative learning topics could also be introduced and included in the role play so that it could maximise their gains from this classroom learning experience.

Discussion

Before conducting my project, I was doing most of the talking and students demonstrated limited active engagement in my classroom. However, after the project's completion, I noticed that students were now more actively engaged in the class activities and I was doing less of the talking. Furthermore, I have now become more reflective. Before the project, I would blame the students for not actively engaging in my class activities, but afterwards, I turned the analytical power of deep reflection upon myself, my practice, my module design and my class activity content, realising that the problem of lack of engagement by my students lay not with them but with my own methodology.

During the first five minutes of the role play activity, I noticed that some students seemed afraid to share their ideas and thoughts in front of their peers and teacher, even in a small group, perhaps because it was their first experience of role play or because of low self-esteem or lack of confidence in expressing opinions (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017). Yet, when the activity was over, it was apparent that the students who had previously been shy now were showing more self-confidence and had made some improvement in their communication skills, possibly indicating the positive influence of increased interaction with their peers. Such forms of student-student and teacher-student interactions may well enhance communication.

Role play can develop students' problem-solving skills, too, thanks to simulations – of real-life situations – which enable reflection on personal learning experience and then encourage the application of critical-thinking skills and effective construction of argument, drawing upon knowledge gained from the lectures (Choy and Cheah, 2009).

Did the role play activity improve students' overall learning experience? Based on my findings, the answer is 'yes'. The feedback from my students was largely positive. The role play had helped them to engage actively and provided them with opportunities to relate theory learnt in the classroom to practice. My findings were consistent with those of other action research projects (Kuśnierek, 2015; Moss, 2000; Rashid and Qaisar, *op.cit.*): role play encourages peer-to-peer interaction; students can learn by interacting with other students rather than only with teachers. Role play can also be used by teachers to assess students' understanding of a topic previously taught in class.

Although some students reported that participating in a role play session can sometimes be a stressful learning experience, this challenge can be overcome if the session is well-designed and led by a well-trained teacher (Johansson *et al.*, 2012). In my case, for the role play to be carried out effectively and to meet planned learning outcomes, I need to have very good understanding of module topics; I also must establish a classroom environment conducive to the acquisition of critical-thinking skills through active learning.

Using the Gibb's model, I reflected that, before the implementation of my action research project, I had been working within my comfort zone and not experimenting with alternative teaching strategies that might improve the student learning experience. I have now acquired some new ideas for encouraging active classroom engagement (Craig, 2018) and been challenged to continue reflecting on my learning and teaching practice, especially in a TNE context (Smith, 2009).

My findings suggest that role play can be used as a productive teaching strategy to enhance student learning experience in a diverse student body within XJTLU (i.e. a TNE context) and have helped me to understand better the role of a teacher working in such a TNE context as this (Waters and Leung, 2013). Thanks to the project, I have incorporated inclusive teaching methods into my own practice and intend to develop these. Now, I am able to acknowledge, recognise, meet and accommodate the different learning needs of a diverse student body in my classroom (Yorke, 2003). XJTLU advocates a student-focused approach and the application of an outcome-based method to its TNE education. As a TNE teacher, I am thus very aware of my responsibility for facilitating my students' development (Tian and Martin, 2014).

I need also to be aware of the differences in learning approaches between Chinese and Western students. Confucianist elements have significantly influenced learning and teaching approaches in China, including a strong hierarchical relationship between students and teachers (Heffernan *et al.*, 2010). Chinese students are less likely to express their own opinions (Heffernan *et al.*, *op.cit*.; Hou, 2015) and might well lack confidence in speaking English (Wang and Roopchund, 2005). As a TNE teacher at XJTLU, in the light of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, I can better understand and explain how my students engage with and experience the differences in culture of learning and teaching in my classroom (Greenholtz, 2000).

The inclusion of more local content in my module is another approach I should like to explore, with examples, short videos and case studies related to public health in China, so that they may able to distinguish how public health systems in Asian and Western countries differ from each other. By means of pedagogical context in assessment tasks, I can help to improve the student learning experience (Jayakumar, 2008; To and Carless, 2016).

I acknowledge that, when I design the role play activity again, I should like to set more initial ground rules, whilst also giving more flexibility to the students. I hope that, with these changes, student engagement in the role play will increase, thereby resulting in the achievement of the module learning outcomes. Conversations with students have indicated that a mixture of techniques – including role play but with the addition of, say, the flipped classroom or online discussions – to meet varying learning styles may address what I have observed: that role play as a single strategy, no matter how hard I try, will not interest all students to an equal degree.

I should also like to include some research-led learning and teaching elements in my classroom activities, because students would like to know how the knowledge they learn can be applied to real life or the research world. Subsequently, this will help them to undertake inquiry-based learning and become active learners. I wish to re-design my module and assessment tasks, incorporating some virtual learning environment and in-class technologies, because online and offline learning now can supplement each other to improve students' learning experience and encourage, in my students, greater learner autonomy. A reconfiguring of the module learning outcomes and having a flipped classroom will almost certainly help to maximise time for supporting student learning.

How to apply these findings to other disciplines, including business education?

As a teacher, especially one working in TNE, I realise that there are many different challenges in teaching, including the urge to maintain enjoyable and captivating teaching and learning processes in classrooms. I do believe that my project findings could be applied to other disciplines. In a business education programme, which involves teaching to students the fundamentals and operations of business practice and industry – communications, entrepreneurship, leadership, international business and interpersonal skills, some of these topics are rather abstract and most students have limited working experience; here – especially for students enrolled in TNE – role play would be beneficial because they can develop global competency skills and understand diversity in the business environment. The incorporation of role play into teaching and learning business processes may actively engage students in classroom and improve their learning outcomes.

Conclusions

My findings have provided me with a rich and contextualised understanding of role play. I have demonstrated that role play can be used as a pedagogical approach to improve students' active learning experience in the classroom because it is a student-focused approach. In addition, I have found that role play has played a significant role in improving the communication skills and learning behaviour of students in my own classroom within the TNE context. My findings also suggest the applicability of role play as a teaching and learning method to other disciplines, such as business education in TNE, because it can reinforce learning and enhance knowledge retention among students in the classroom. It is therefore important that future studies should consider exploring its much wider application.

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A socio-cultural approach in virtual classrooms - key implications for practice for Business Education

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Abstract

As online classrooms have recently become integral to the teaching of Business Education in the United Kingdom (UK) and as a key challenge here is to use available resources effectively, all business teachers must be proficient in deploying virtual learning. Most international students entering Business Education do not know how to use a virtual learning environment (VLE); many are grappling with the transition to adult life, living alone and away from families. All business teachers are therefore responsible for engaging and involving each of them; by adopting a socio-cultural model in virtual learning classrooms, they can work with students on the gradual development of key business skills and characteristics with potentially broad application.

This article discusses: a socio-cultural approach to the online teaching and learning of Business Education, together with implications for practice; the socio-cultural model proposed by Brenton (2014), with its key elements – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how) and activity (what). This particular model clearly incorporates the social and cultural characteristics of the student in business; it explains to students and develops in them such key business skills as problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, planning and organisation; it encourages in them self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and a sense of responsibility. All of these skills and characteristics enhance employability and pave the way to future success in business enterprise. Understanding what Business Education students each bring to the virtual classroom is therefore essential to the creation of independent learners. The article focuses on the cultivation of collaboration in online classrooms and on developing communities of learning, with ideas for practice; it outlines the role of the lecturer in the virtual classroom, especially in sustaining inclusivity; it concludes by affirming the importance of lecturers' development of a social collaborative process in virtual classrooms, of their establishment of an inclusive online ethos and of their encouragement of skills that enhance employability and lead to success in business too. Many learners with anxiety, shyness and personal barriers to integration with other business students can benefit from the application of a socio-cultural model in VLEs. There are clear implications for all key stakeholders – students, lecturers, policy makers and developers of online classroom technology.

Keywords: Socio-cultural approach, online classroom, communities of learning, collaboration, business education

1.0 Introduction

The use of technology to engage learners in the learning process has gathered momentum over the last few years. In some instances, traditional classroom models are disappearing and are being quickly replaced by the virtual learning environment (VLE) (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Hanna *et.al.*,2000; Palloff and Pratt, 2001). A VLE is a virtual classroom where students and lecturers can communicate with each other and exchange course-related information, assignments and learning material. The Business Education lecturer can communicate with students in real time, using a web camera to deliver group activities and course content effectively. In some Business Education teaching, a combination of face-to-face and virtual classrooms – the 'blended approach' to teaching and learning – is being adopted. The core threads of all teaching programmes are employability, ethics, responsibility and global and cultural insights (Butcher, 2014) and the delivery of all business teaching – face-to-face and online – should encompass them. They are woven into all key Business Education subject areas – Business Organisation, People in Business, Marketing, Operations and Production, Finance and Strategic Management. Clear understanding of each of the two mediums of teaching can enable lecturers to deliver effective business teaching in virtual classrooms. Bhandari (2017), in a recent study, emphasises the importance of creating effective teaching environments.

Face-to-face teaching sessions and online ADOBE sessions are contrasting, unique mediums used by all lecturers to deliver teaching in Business Education subjects. Acquiring confidence in using them effectively to create an environment conducive to independent learning is a challenge for all. The ultimate goal of both of them is to encourage learners to be independent, with learners taking sole charge of the process and direction of learning (Balapuni and Aitken, 2012). Engestrom (1999) maintains that the key aspects – learners, others, learning environment, learning activity and the learning outcomes – are vital to the planning of all sessions. All sessions should aim, as Garrison (1997) states, to develop an effective learning environment, with due consideration of self-management and control of the learning task, self-monitoring and responsibility, along with motivation and self-efficacy as factors important to independent learning. For Business Education students, self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and responsibility are all fundamental to both employability and success in business enterprise.

In both types of delivery, the design of the session is an important aspect. According to Brenton (2014), there are five key components to keep in mind when designing any online or face-to-face session – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what). Most sessions are tailored to student needs. Knowing students as active, social, creative learners can aid in planning business sessions well.

2.0 The socio-cultural approach and Business Education

The socio-cultural approach to learning focuses on the interaction of socio-cultural environment and learning and, particularly, on how learning is influenced by engagement in socio-cultural activities. This approach maintains that students should be perceived as active learners who develop new social identities through participation in 'communities of learning'. Business Education students should be given opportunities to engage in collaborative activities; they should be equipped with tools and concepts for application within communities of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the framework for understanding learning as participation in social practices to develop the concept of communities of practice – in these, people come together to engage in activities where the learning is central to all interaction. Through online virtual classrooms, all Business Education students can develop the important skills of communication, engagement, collaboration and problem-solving.

3.0 Business students in a virtual classroom

On arrival, Business Education students bring with them past experience of teaching and learning, knowledge of concepts and ideas, real-life experience and the particular characteristics of age, gender, sociability, motivation and personal goals. Biggs (1993) discusses the '3P' model – Presage, Process and Product. Many researchers have discussed what a student brings to the classroom – the influence of socio-economic context, expectations of success (Duffy and Jonassen, 1992), ways of thinking (Gardner,1993), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and teaching in higher education (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2002). All such factors are in constant interaction in the online room and relationships between students are therefore always changing; the lecturer, as facilitator, must manage and shape this state of flux.

As part of the delivery of module content, the lecturer must make sure that students, in the VLE, create meaning and demonstrate understanding of business concepts and ideas and must nurture the process of creating, maintaining and perceiving relationships. Rogoff's (1993) study discusses shared meaning-making and intersubjectivity. It is clear that previous teaching and learning episodes can facilitate joint focus and effective collaboration where learners understand and create meaning together in the VLE.

In online classrooms, awareness of others and their sources of knowledge aids collaboration and enables students to meet the learning outcomes designed for that online session. Garton (2003) argues that 'theory of mind' is important in terms of awareness of another person in the interaction; specific awareness of that person's source of knowledge can also help learners to create relationships in the virtual classroom. As virtual classrooms are heavily reliant on talk and on-screen visuals, some studies, like that by Teasley (1995), explain the importance of talk in problem-solving in teaching and learning.

Furthermore, differences between learners in terms of sociability and language in the online business classroom may be of critical importance in determining whether the session succeeds or not, as may differences in expectations, motivations and attitudes. Bonino and Cattelino (1999) identify the concept of 'cognitive flexibility' in learners. This is the ability to suppress one's response and switch to another response in reaction to an external cue or changes in the environment. In virtual classrooms, cues are from the talk and the visuals presented in the online discussion. Virtual classrooms demand adaptation by and cognitive flexibility in all participants, including the lecturer.

In virtual classrooms, the relationship between the lecturer and the students changes according to the delivery tool. Students in virtual classrooms are unable to make judgements about the competency level, personality or ability of the other learners. It is important to sustain both awareness and acceptance of the fact that each learner brings to the virtual room clear personal objectives, a social and cultural identity and an individual journey so far. Business students bring real-life experiences of work, leadership and practical understanding of real-life issues, along with course content, all of which constitutes a rich means of creating inter-relationships between these online learners. As many international students opt for a Business Education degree, the range and depth of their cultural and social experiences are respectively diverse and complex.

A competent way to deliver and shape an effective Business Education session is to draw on the cultural and social factors this wide range of students brings to the virtual room, using small-group interaction to build a base for discussion and subsequent development of content knowledge, to lead thereafter to communities of learning. Drawing on examples of practice and details of personal experiences can further enrich such group discussions.

3.1 People (who)

Some researchers correlate the successful setting of expectations before the online session with the success of teaching and learning. If lecturers prepare students for what is to be expected online, what to look for in terms of learning outcomes and how to succeed ahead of time, then the chances of effective delivery are high (Cook, 2000; Evans, 2001; Jones and Kelly, 2003).

Online teaching makes it difficult for lecturers to understand fully the specific needs, circumstances and pre-engagement of learners (Coppola *et al.*, 2002). This may be advantageous in that the lecturer must build into the virtual business classroom academic-related information and conceptual clarity, but it may also be difficult to guess at facial expressions or check misunderstandings if learners are minimally engaged. It is therefore extremely important to identify ‘the person’ in the virtual classroom before key conceptual engagement and delivery.

This can be done effectively in a number of ways – before the start of the session, during it and at its end. Identifying and addressing the group before the online session in emails or face-to-face interaction or on forums can initiate a dialogue about such significant issues as specific personal learning difficulties, threshold concepts and factors affecting the learning process. During the session, there should be at least two or three opportunities for learners to interact in pairs or small groups or add comments to the chat box. Writing on the slides on the virtual white board is one technique that all students enjoy. At the end of each online session, learners should be given time to clarify any doubts and misunderstandings.

Competence in the use of an online tool in a virtual classroom can also be an important factor in achieving understanding of the person. Some Business Education students and lecturers may be very competent with the tools and tasks of the virtual room, while others may be less confident, reserved and shy to engage – in order to avoid errors. Lecturers should endeavour to scaffold the confidence of the learners in each session by maybe giving, at the start, a tour of the room and its specialist function keys. It is advisable to run some trial or pilot sessions for students who are new to virtual learning and so build their confidence. In an online classroom, the lecturer should follow an inclusive approach to learning where there is a variety of ways for students to engage with the topic, offering flexibility to students who have different educational needs, dispositions and tendencies in the way they learn (Brenton, 2014).

To build confidence in Business Education students, lecturers themselves should not have any barriers to their own understanding or use of online tools, but must keep abreast of changes in technology and undertake training for upgraded VLE tools. Many settings offer staff development programmes and encourage the building of lecturer communities of practice. Pairing less competent lecturers with more adept staff in virtual rooms can also aid in building their confidence.

3.2 Shared purpose (why)

As in a face-to-face teaching session, there are ample online opportunities for the teacher and learners to check and align expectations, clarify learning outcomes and clear up misunderstandings (Conaway *et al*., 2005). The purpose of the online session should be created and maintained by lecturer and students together. Giving students choice in the online session enhances learning and creates the element of 'social presence' that links into the community of learners (Stein and Wandstreet, 2003). Each online session should have clear aims and learning outcomes, which are then aligned to the materials, activities and assessment (Brenton, 2014). All sessions should pivot on SMART learning objectives and the learners should be able to shape and align the objectives and purpose of a session in terms of specific (unique to each learner) and general (specific to the module and curriculum). It is sometimes effective to ask students on the forum and in groups about key concepts and ideas for which they need help and support.

3.3 Locating framework and social conditions (where)

It is extremely important in all online Business Education sessions to locate where the learning activity for that session is placed in terms of the wider module, assessment and other key concepts. It is crucial to identify how that online session advances to the next level the required knowledge and understanding. (Brenton, 2014). Johnson and Johnson (2005) discuss how 'joining together' in the online sessions can create 'swim or sink together' scenarios for the learners, where each learner recognises the value of contributions made by others. In many Business Education subjects that students engage in, these 'swim or sink together' scenarios assume considerable importance and prepare for that integral part of business learning – group work – which moves learners from independence to interdependence in online communities of learning. In real practice, it may be effective to incorporate reflections on teaching and course themes by starting the session with group and individual input on learning so far. It is of benefit if lecturers indicate the themes addressed and where the present learning session fits in with the 'big picture' of the module or content.

3.4 Method (how)

Online teaching sessions should focus on two key aspects in the method of delivery: first, initiative taking and communicating and, second, learning to learn. These two aspects are critical in all Business Education modules. All online sessions should aim for clear communication between the learners, these having been contacted early, before the sessions. Lecturers should take the initiative to make this prior contact with learners, highlighting by means of group or individual contact the shared goals of the session. The lecturer takes on a proactive, supportive and facilitating role (Conaway, Easton and Schmidt, 2005).

The lecturer in the virtual classroom acts as a facilitator of the learning process and has a complex relationship to maintain with all learners. The facilitator should allow the learners to take ownership of their learning process and build new information and meaning through interaction with others. Building trust in the group and creating an encouraging learning environment in the community of learners online constitute the facilitator's key role. For many Business Education lecturers, this could be the application of all teaching, social and business skills learnt throughout their interaction with the learners. Building trust and a level of comfort can further help communication to flow effectively before, during and after the session, to its overall benefit (Hiltz and Turoff, 2002).

For students, an online session should have the inherent goal of making them effective learners and enabling their progress towards realistic personal and group targets. 'Learning to learn', or metacognition, is another important area the virtual learning environment can tap into. Brown (1997) highlights how reflective activities like discussion, questioning, querying and criticism should be incorporated into all teaching. These self-reflective activities are then gradually internalised and help to develop 'communities of learners'. Facilitators should make sure that reflection and self-reflection are incorporated well, into all sessions. There should be enough time and opportunity in each session for these reflective activities. Ability to reflect, weigh options and make changes and decisions are an important part of Business Education learning.

3.5 Activity (what)

The inclusiveness of selected activities and their clear purpose should be kept in focus throughout the online session. The activity selected should be in line with the goal and the wider context of the course delivery. SMART objectives of the session should align with the key goals of the activity. Before the selection of each activity for an online session, the lecturer should consider carefully its purpose and the rationale for its use. The activities selected should not be merely for the sake of engagement but should enable learners to develop deeper understanding of concepts and ideas. In each online session, lecturers should make a clear attempt to include critical analysis and reflection. The activities should be inclusive – encouraging students of all different learning styles to engage – and have multiple prompts and peer feedback; all learners must realise their own personal goals (Brenton, 2014). A wide range of activities should be used: videos, reflective tasks, activities for the building of study skills and critical evaluation of the material, concepts and ideas. Details of the activity and how students will approach it should be considered well before any online session.

Brenton's (2014) five key components – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what) can create an inclusive environment for the teaching of business online. All lecturers who are continuously looking for techniques for including all students and for effectively delivering module outcomes can benefit from applying these five key components to create an inclusive online ethos. Collaboration online can help in overcoming barriers to learning in Business Education.

4.0 Inclusive Collaboration in learning online

Christiansen and Dirckinck-Holmfeld (1995) state that collaborative learning requires a means and an environment of study, where students should together be able to create joint goals, apply personal motivations and experiences and use dialogue to enquire. Collaborative activities remove a sense of isolation and loneliness in online Business Education sessions. Studies maintain that the greater the involvement of students in the design, assessment, content and evaluation of the learning, the more motivation and responsibility for their learning process they demonstrate. Business Education online lecturers should promote the fair involvement of all learners in the shaping and structuring of all sessions, as well as in the suggesting of ideas for assessment. Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995) discuss the collaborative model in creative thinking online. This kind of collaborative working online helps learners to externalise learning and use their experiences in the learning process. Creative thinking is an important skill that all Business Education learners develop through online teaching.

To create joint goals in an online session, it is important that lecturers negotiate the goals with the learners. Lecturers should set a plan for the session and ask students to give their input about their own expectations and goals, in line with the key group goals. Thus, they may see and understand planning and organisation, with clear goals in action too. After introductions and learning expectations, the session can start with some icebreaker activities. Lecturers should ask the learners to comment on introductions of other learners and meet and greet each learner as s/he enters the virtual room. When forming teams in an online session, it is effective to give the learners choice in forming their groups. Lecturers can help learners in setting a clear directive, with guidelines, about small-group activities.

Brookfield and Perskill (2005) maintain that the collaboration is set to grow effectively if students engage online with each other rather than with the lecturer. The role of the lecturer is therefore as facilitator of this collaborative talk in online classrooms. Since achieving success in collaboration online is an addictive process, students who are successful in collaborating online will enjoy doing it more in future tasks. This in some ways helps students with inhibitions about interaction and communication to work with others. For many students, this reduces the sense of isolation and loneliness in the university.

Promoting feedback to the lecturer and the online community of learners in a virtual classroom is extremely important. Covey (1989) states that developing a way of first understanding and then being understood is important in feedback in virtual classrooms. The feedback has to be deeper than just stating a positive brief comment such as “This is good.” If so, it promotes interdependence and a sense of community in collaboration in online sessions. Differences and diversity among the students in the online session should be perceived as appropriate positives rather than deficiencies (Barnett, 2007). These differences should be valuable in further shaping and making the session inclusive.

5.0 Reflections on business teaching practice in an online classroom session

Creating an environment that makes students independent learners is a continuous and cumulative process for all Business Education lecturers. Reflections on how far the goals of each session were achieved and how far it led to successful completion of individual and group goals are an important method of assessing its success.

There should be an opportunity in the virtual classroom for each learner to rate the effectiveness of the content and process of teaching. The last part of the session should be an open discussion, allowing students to write on the virtual whiteboards their reflections, worries and what they could not achieve. All this then becomes a strong thread for inclusion in forum discussion and later sessions for supporting the learning of content. For the lecturer, the craft of teaching online can be shaped further by building and integrating the reflections and points of improvement into the sessions to follow.

Business Education lecturers should practise what works and make relevant changes in small parts to make sure that all session goals are well achieved. It is sometimes effective, before the real online session takes place, to practise with peers the session and tool use in empty online classrooms. Observations of peers and peer walk-in to the virtual classrooms can further support lecturers in the shaping of an effective teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

Classrooms online are a reflection of complex socio-cultural factors with impact upon their use and continuing effectiveness for both lecturers and students. Developing a social collaborative process in virtual classrooms, with lecturer as a facilitator, can enable the best use of virtual classroom. Applying the socio-cultural model to online Business Education teaching can help all students to develop some important key skills: problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, planning and organisation. This model further develops self-management, self-efficacy, self-monitoring and responsibility in Business Education students. Business Education lecturers can create an inclusive online teaching and learning environment by applying Benton's (2014) five key components – people (who), shared purpose (why), locating framework and social conditions (where), method (how), and activity (what).Understanding and applying knowledge about students to create and maintain an inclusive ethos online can further support students with psychological and personal barriers. Many learners with anxiety, shyness and personal barriers to integration with other business students can benefit from application of the socio-cultural model in virtual learning environments.

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Thematic analysis of individual feedback: Improving cohort feedforward

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Abstract

Assessment literacy is important for students' academic success. This multi-case study explores scholarly writing mistakes commonly made by direct-entrant international students at level 7. The data consists of assessment data from 150 student scripts. Results show common themes related to cross-cultural differences for international students who began their masters-level higher educational experience in a new culture and new environment. It contributes common factors, hitherto hidden in student assessment data in Turnitin's global writing technology.

Keywords: Assessment and marking; thematic analysis; assessment literacy; feedforward, business education

1. Introduction

Turnitin assessment text data can be made visible rather than remaining unseen, unnoticed and therefore unactionable (Bienkowski *et al*., 2012). A poster presentation at the University of Greenwich Learning and Teaching Festival 2019 became a transformative learning experience that led to the perception of Turnitin assessment data as a new data source for assessment analysis, modelled using activity theory.

2. Background

The poster reported an inductive study which developed an in-depth description and analysis of 150 cases of level 7 student essay assessments. The Managing Across Cultures module was taught to 389 students in a United Kingdom (UK) MBA/MA international Business degree programme for new entrant international students, mainly from the continent of Asia. The learning aims concerned the topic of cross-cultural management and were scheduled for teaching in the first semester of arrival in the UK, alongside a module about foundations of scholarship. The poster presented at the Learning and Teaching Festival aimed to provide a case study of how one sessional worker adopted qualitative data analysis (QDA) software to manage the complexity and time pressure of high-volume assessment and marking. The Turnitin software is designed to facilitate a single set of marks and feedback per student script, but doesn't currently include any features designed specifically to support either document management of multiple marking teams or assessment analysis across multiple students.

In the case study, 150 student scripts were coded in the same way as in Turnitin. The main rationale for doing so was to consult – more easily – those written and oral briefings, assessment criteria, module handbooks and additional study guides, descriptors and samples of marked work as add document complexity to the enterprise of marking. Accomplishing this activity smoothly – often in ten rather than fifteen days, irrespective of the assessment workload incurred by any one individual – is no mean feat. The assessment criteria defined in the module handbook were based on a portfolio assignment of three tasks: a) cultural interview and personal profile 550 words (15%); b) reflection on cross-cultural competencies 450 words (15%); and c) case analysis using cross-cultural management theories, 2000 words (70%).

3. Research method

The study aimed to provide a description of common areas of assessment feedback on the learning of a large cohort of students. Such an analysis is in line with concerns of educational practitioners that *"feedback is a troublesome issue in higher education"* (Nicol *et al*., 2014, p.102). The situational influence on the students' learning gain was that these students were mostly from non-western higher education (HE) systems and were entering level 7 as direct-entry international students studying Cross-Cultural Management. A case study protocol and multiple data sources were used to provide data triangulation and to enhance the reliability and validity of findings (Denzin 1989; Yin 2015). Thematic analysis of data within each case and analytic comparison of data across cases were conducted to unveil, along key themes, similarities and differences in the evidence (Neuman 2006). At the same time, relevant module handbook documents and teaching team guidance and communications materials were analysed for corroborative or contradictory evidence to enhance the validity of the case study findings (Yin, 2015).

4. Results

As it was exploratory in nature, an iterative approach to analysis and identification of themes and activities was employed in the multiple-case study research. By means of the software programme mentioned above – to code and refine the rich data through an immersion/crystallisation process enabling back-and-forth working between the themes and the database (Cresswell and Poth, 2018) – three themes were identified in the feedback:

4.1 **Theme 1**: scholarly argument missing one or more of the following components: a) proposition; b) reasoning – usually from theory and supported by evidence; c) conclusion – the solution to the proposition and justified by the reasoning.
4.2 **Theme 2**: lack of resourcefulness in data collection and of criticism in data selection; weakness in acknowleging sources.
4.3 **Theme 3**: discomfort with writing reflectively – a common assessment type across the programme.

5. Discussion

The results indicated a potential correlation between student nationality and weak foundation in scholarship for demonstrating learning aims of the module in Cross-Cultural Management. The module taught students about the need to understand cultures and how they can differ – sometimes significantly – between nations and regions. However, in the programme's scheduling, this aspect was built **neither** into socialisation **nor** into creation and reinforcement of new normative beliefs. The results point towards the need for research on the impact of culture on assessment and, especially, a) the influence of group interests within collective cultures (Hofstede, 1983) and b) the respective influence of neutral and affective cultures (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012) on normative beliefs about argumentative and reflective writing.

Transformative learning

The by-product of assessment and marking outside the Turnitin system was that otherwise tacit knowledge of common assessment errors across a cohort of students was now captured for inductive thematic analysis and results were available for a) summary feedback when marks are released; b) narrative data for annual module reporting; c) learning gain data for reflecting on future assessment and module design. Several conference delegates identified Turnitin Assessment analysis as an assessment analytic. My frame of reference to produce the conference poster was as a sessional worker coping with the process of marking. Looking back, these delegate comments were integral to self-reflection and learning, helping to shape my thinking that thematic analysis of assessment data on any module could conceivably be used for re-designing the learning environment for the following academic year. Mezirow (2000) suggested that transformative learning only occurs when problematic frames of reference that fix assumptions and expectations are consciously unlearned. *"A frame of reference encompasses cognitive, conative, and emotional components, and is composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view."* (Mezirow (1997, p.5). I had read about Mezirow's transformative learning in a recent book – 'Contemporary Theories of Learning' (Illeris, 2018) – and the delegates' comments stimulated the metacognitive process of reassessing reasons. Mezirow (2003) considered that an open mind and the ability to listen empathetically to others are necessary for reflective practice to occur.

Potential conceptual framework from transformative learning

Having been unfrozen (Lewin, 1943) from my frame of reference of a marking process, what new frame pertaining to student learning activities might I change to? Activity theory (Engestrom, 1987) systemically examines the context in which learning occurs as well as the design process. The activity 'system' conceived by Engestrom appears below (figure 1). The top half (shown as production), dynamically links the subject who performs an activity to the object of the activity and the tools that the subject uses in the activity. Below this triangle is the context – the division of labour associated with the activity within the community or organisation, members of which share a set of social meanings or rules for conducting such activities.

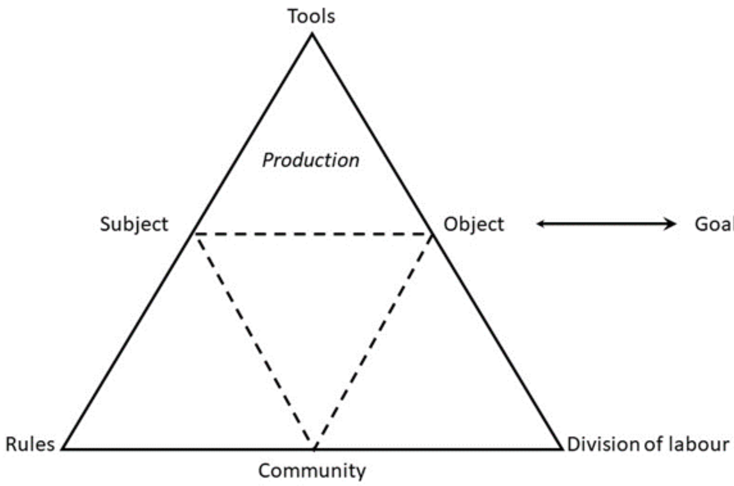

Figure 1: Activity theory model (Source: Engestrom, 1987)

Jonassen and Roner-Murphy (1999, p.62) argued that activity theory (Engestrom, 1987) provides a powerful conceptual framework for designing a learning environment because *"it posits that conscious learning emerges from activity (performance), not a precursor to it"*. Xing *et al*., (2014) operationalised activity theory in a computer-supported collaborative learning computer environment to develop a student performance prediction model based on the six activity theory variables – subject, object, tools, division of labour, rules and community. Jonassen and Roner-Murph relied on very different epistemic assumptions about the design of a student learning environment from traditional methods which assume relevant knowledge to be embedded in the instruction for transfer to the learner in any context. They explicate, using activity theory, the methods for creating a constructive learning environment.

The interpersonal dialogue at the conference about my poster led me to a new frame of reference. How about a theoretically grounded factorisation of three sets of data in order both to improve module design and adapt tutoring to individual student contexts? Namely, the integration of – as an activiy theory tool - of: a) historical assessment data, as a community factor; b) student categorical data, as a subject factor; and c) learning analytic data about in-class (audience participation tools) and on-line learning activities (virtual learning environment analytics). Figure 2 models the structure of such an activity system, extending Engestrom (1999) through inclusion of assessment data in the community component.

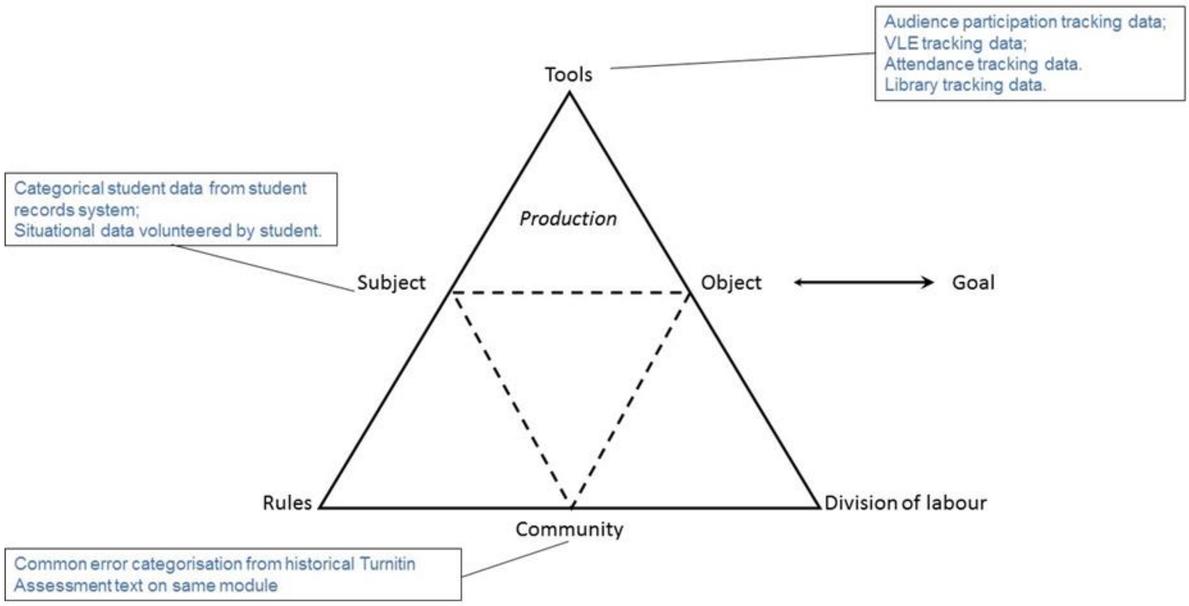

Figure 2 Profiling Turnitin data – an adaptation of activity theory model. Source: Author, derived from Engestrom (1987)

A description of activity theory operationalisation in order to make sense of historical Turnitin assessment data as a learning catalytic is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Student performance prediction model operationalisation of activity theory

Dimension	Definition
Production	Learning involves a subject student; the mental object of activity, being learning; the learning resource tools such as the VLE that are used in the activity. As activity systems are conceived to be socially and contextually bound, the actions and operations that affect an outcome include the rules, community and division of labour.
Subject	Individual students who engage in the activity to achieve the object of learning.
Object	Completing learning tasks – represents the intention that motivates the activity.
Tools	Computers, online tools, systems, and environments that mediate the learning activity.
Division of labour	Individual assignments within the overall activity, which is also mediated by rules and social negotiation.
Rules	Implicit and explicit rules and guidelines that constrain the activity. For example, institutional academic rules of student behaviour and quality standards and specific rules set by module leaders for learning tasks (explicit). An individual student can use only the function residing in the supporting tools (implicit).
Community	The community of students at the same academic level who have previously completed the activity of learning. The customary areas of difficulty or errors in completion form the context of the activity in which it operates.

The activity theory factor called ‘community’ in figure 2 and table 1 is perhaps contextually the most relevant to the design of a module. Jonassen and Roner-Murphy (1999) argued that traditional methods of task analysis focused only on the technical core of performance, ignoring the contexts within which learning occurs. Historical assessment text that identifies common themes and associated student categories offers the potential to yield a new source of rich context that is important when designing instruction.

Conclusion

Interest has increased in analytics as part of the solution to many issues in HE (Baker and Yacef, 2009; Romero and Ventura, 2010). However, a practical means of identifying academic at-risk students before the start of term appears to have eluded researchers so far. Mezirow (2000) believed that educational interventions are necessary to ensure that the learner acquires the understandings, skills and dispositions essential for transformative learning. This article offers a model for Turnitin assessment text as a assessment analytic based on transformative learning experiences at the University of Greenwich Learning and Teaching Festival 2019. I hope this reflective report demonstrates that the festival was an effective intervention.

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Could there be an alternative to the undergraduate marketing student's dissertation?

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Background

Undergraduate students at United Kingdom (UK) universities are expected to write a dissertation at the end of their studies. The dissertation has been described as a seal of undergraduate degree programmes in the UK (Rowley, 2000). Students view it as the *"single most substantial, and independently worked upon, piece of work they will undertake while at university"* (Webster, Pepper and Jenkins, 2000, p. 72). The emotional rollercoaster for students embarking on their dissertation has been well documented. The experience can sometimes require a tutor to step in and guide the students (Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004) and this raises questions about the academic support being provided for them. It may be best to look for an alternative to tutoring to solve this problem and enhance the student experience while maintaining academic quality.

To ease these challenges, various alternatives were presented at the University of Greenwich Business School 2019 Learning and Teaching Festival. The festival explores teaching practices by encouraging: the sharing of effective pedagogies and learning and assessment practice; the exploring of issues regarding student engagement. This piece offers a short and hopefully thought-provoking reflection upon UK student dissertations and support for undergraduate marketing students (Mogaji, 2019a); it raises questions about alternative methods for supporting undergraduate marketing students with their dissertations and acknowledges the challenges that undergraduates face; it identifies key issues that have given rise to questions about the dissertation process and provides alternatives for consideration by tutors and academic staff supporting their students; it also presents the potential advantages and limitations of adopting these alternative methods.

Challenges associated with the undergraduate dissertation

The support provided to students for the writing of their dissertations is crucial (Heinze and Heinze, 2009), for they experience a variety of challenges during this phase of their undergraduate studies. Silén (2003) notes that the freedom of independent research has the negative effect of 'chaos' and 'cosmos' as students feel uneasy and yet excited about their dissertation journey.

That students, expected to choose a topic for their independent research, often struggle to generate one is considered problematic (Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004). These authors found that students frequently find it challenging to produce a research question that is, in fact, researchable; they note that this could be because of lack of experience or limited opportunities and thus call for additional support to help students with the emotional difficulties associated with defining a researchable topic.

Likewise, Reis (1999) acknowledges the initial anxiety and uncertainty undergraduate students face when deciding what topic they are going to work on and highlights the need to provide them with such help as will enable them to feel prepared for and have commitment to an investigation into relevant and current research. Unlike postgraduate students, final-year undergraduates have not yet experienced academic research to the level demanded of dissertations.

Considering these concerns about undergraduate dissertations and students' struggle to find 'researchable' ideas, this paper raises the question 'Could there be alternative methods for research question selection?' and offers an answer in the form of a teaching innovation aimed at easing students' anxiety, relieving their sense of pressure and dispelling their uncertainty about choosing their research topic; it also outlines the support provided for students during the process.

Proposed alternatives

Often, students are expected to select their topics and work with a tutor (a member of the teaching staff) who will support them throughout the process. Since this arrangement has been criticised because of its associated challenges, two alternative methods are presented for consideration.

Call for Papers

A Call for Paper (CfP) is a document circulated by a professional organisation, such as an academic publisher, journal or conference organiser. It invites individuals with interest in a topic (or a list of topics) to submit their research in the form of original scholarly articles for review and consideration for publication in a journal or book, or for presentation at a conference. A CfP often contains background to and rationale for the request, a literature review, a list of relevant topics – often in bullet points – and also key dates for submissions. For the purposes of an undergraduate dissertation, a tutor could use such a document to provide students with various topics, one of which they might opt to explore; it would act as their guide to research questions current within marketing. Alon (2009) recognises the need to do research that is both feasible and interesting, as that is likely to extend our knowledge significantly. ELMAR (Electronic Marketing List Information) – an academic resource offered by the American Marketing Association to the marketing academic community around the world – is a good platform for accessing CfPs for marketing researchers.

Working in tutors' research areas

An alternative method would be to invite students to find a topic within their tutor's specific research area. As tutors supporting the students with their dissertations are more likely to have interest in their respective research areas, they could suggest that students consider topics associated with these. For example, a tutor with interest in social media and stakeholder communications strategies might invite students to explore how different sectors communicate with stakeholders on social media. Without giving an exact topic, the tutor could in this way help streamline the search for a research question. Students would then need only to find a sector and explore possible research questions relevant to that context. As many marketing students have trouble grasping the concept of research (Love and Stelling, 2012), making them work with tutors on a specific research area would help integrate them into the modalities of research. This method would involve supporting students to develop their research method skills and knowledge and so prepare themselves better for their dissertation. This alternative is not about giving the students a specific topic to research; instead, it is about refining the stream of topics to enable them to make relevant, researchable choices for possible exploration. Fiedler (2014) notes that choosing a topic that is 'research-worthy' is essential for a successful dissertation and that there is a need to pay attention to the broader implications of one's research for various audiences, especially those in academia.

Advantages and limitations of proposed alternatives

Reflection on past experiences of adopting these alternatives, as well as on feedback from students and staff during the presentation, indicates that there are advantages and limitations that should be considered. One significant advantage of these alternatives is that they give the students a sense of direction for their dissertation: they feel they have a place to start and a path to follow – often a crucial motivation, for once they have that sense of direction, they are spurred on to explore the topic further and conduct their literature review. Staff confirm that students are more motivated when their research topic is finalised. In addition, the tutor is likely to demonstrate greater willingness and eagerness to give support when the student is researching within the tutor's own area of interest; the tutor is better equipped to share readily available information, especially that from relevant and current literature. The student is also aware that more guidance is forthcoming during the process – as there is a sense of collaboration and understanding between tutor and student – and feels less pressure and greater reassurance in the presence of available tutor expertise.

Despite these advantages, a couple of limitations must be considered. With regard to the second proposal, tutors need to make sure that their own ideas align with the working principles of the dissertation modules in their universities. This issue was also raised during the presentation. It is, however, important to note that the students are not explicitly provided with research topics and questions but rather with a CfP that is open to different interpretations. In addition, there is no guarantee or expectation that students will be interested in and excited about this process. There are students who may feel they want to continue with the proposal they wrote in their second year, and their wish should be respected.

Conclusion

This reflective piece raised a question about an alternative approach to the undergraduate dissertation, as presented during the 'Sharing Good Practice' session at the 2019 University of Greenwich Business Faculty Learning and Teaching Festival, where tutors could share their own practices with other colleagues. During the presentations, attending staff were able to corroborate the practices being shared, offer feedback to enhance pedagogical research and discuss how they might implement such methodology in their departments to suppport their undergraduate students. The majority of session participants were unaware of the approaches to the student dissertation presented in this piece and it was certainly fascinating to see their surprised recognition that they have, in their own fields, CfPs from which students might well benefit!

The piece provides insight into the presentation, which itself highlighted a problem regarding the selection of dissertation topic by marketing undergraduate students; it offers two alternative methods that benefit students by introducing them to current research questions that need answers, making them less anxious about their research topic and helping them to develop skills relevant to their future careers. These alternatives are aimed at tutors working with students who are struggling with selecting a research topic and working on their research methods as they plan for their dissertations.

It is important to note that some students may also be reluctant to work with these ideas, as they may feel that they are too rigid and that they would rather do without them. However, tutors can be flexible with regard to the research areas they offer to the students and can show them additional CfPs to choose from. Tutors must make the students aware of these alternatives to help them find a topic that both aligns with their interests and is research-worthy. Most importantly, they should always support students in their decision.

Students should also be informed that it is not compulsory to choose a topic that has been suggested or made available by the CfPs. Students are still responsible for their learning and should therefore be supported in choosing a topic that they are personally interested in. Reis (1999) argues that finding the ideal research topic is more than just selecting from options provided by tutors. Students may prefer not to select from limited options and therefore it is important to recognise their need to develop an interest of their own choice; they should be supported in developing their research skills and capacity for independent research (Mogaji, 2019b).

The presented alternatives, with their advantages and limitations outlined here, are meant to be optional suggestions for tutors and students and should never act as roadblocks to research freedom. Students are still expected to gain, competently and individually, new knowledge that they find fascinating and self-expressive (Alon, 2009). Tutors should act as guides to the students in exploring alternatives.

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