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Transforming the Student Experience with “Practitioner Insights”: an initiative to combine up-to-date curriculum development and employability skills

Category: Student Experience

Deborah Anderson

*Kingston University, Kingston upon Thames, UK*

Introduction

This paper will present initial findings from a research project which will evaluate a learning and teaching initiative “Practitioner Insights”, an approach designed to improve the student experience with a particular focus on employability. In addition, the project is driven by the need to ensure that the curriculum and pedagogy are up-to-date with developments in the workplace and in educational theory. The context is UK higher education and the subject area is marketing communications. It is envisaged that findings will be transferable across other subject areas and across international boundaries.

A learning and teaching initiative: “Practitioner Insights”

“Practitioner Insights” is a learning and teaching initiative developed at Kingston University. In brief, as part of a portfolio assessment on a second year undergraduate marketing communications module, students are required to visit marketing practitioners in their workplace to film a short interview on current trends in marketing communications. Students then lead class discussions drawing upon the views of practitioners, both on current trends in marketing communications, and on employability related issues. The module has 60 students and small groups of 4-5 students will carry out a total of 12 visits to marketing companies (from existing staff contacts and alumni).

The initiative is intended to transform the student experience in both subject knowledge and in developing an understanding of the employment environment. It has been developed as a result of three key drivers: the need to ensure an up-to-date curriculum, changes in the way students learn and a need to develop employability skills. These will now be explored in more detail.

Ensuring an up-to-date curriculum

Marketing Communications is a constantly changing discipline area, with practice often leading theory as new technologies and communication tools are available to practitioners. Although Business schools often have strong industry links and use guest speakers for in-depth understanding of specific cases, this initiative will have the advantage of collecting numerous “snapshots” across all sectors and across different types of organizations (in this case clients, agencies and trade bodies). Engaging the students in the collection of industry viewpoints will enable staff to include far more practitioner contributions than if they were organising guest speakers single-handedly. Students will be exposed to cutting edge practice which can then be used to interrogate theoretical models and challenge existing knowledge in the classroom.

Changes in the way students learn

Studies in the marketing education literature have noted that students are apparently “wired differently” and typically do not respond well to a traditional lecture style format (Matulich et al., 2008). Educators are urged to re-consider delivery methods to accommodate this new generation of

learners (Matulich et al., 2008). We are urged to create new pedagogical approaches which are flexible and which can be modified (Wymbs, 2011). This initiative moves the learning completely away from the traditional lecture format, with student engagement in the co-construction of knowledge at the heart of the approach. Indeed, given the rapid emergence of new marketing communication approaches (e.g. social media, mobile marketing), it is impossible to rely on traditional methods of learning and teaching in which the tutor is the all-knowing “sage” who then transmits his or her knowledge to the students. Hager (2004) identified this shift as one from a “standard” paradigm of learning to an “emerging” paradigm. In the “standard paradigm”, learners “acquire” knowledge by filling up a series of containers with universal context-free knowledge. Here there is a view of “learning as product” (Hager, 2004a p.5) where what is learned is relatively stable over time. In the “emerging” paradigm, the main change is not the altered “cleverness” of the learner, but the creation of a new set of relations in an environment. In a world where knowledge will continue to be contested, it is important for students to experience this type of learning and understand that it is not always possible to find readily available facts, but that it is necessary to construct new knowledge using non-traditional methods. In this initiative, the interview content will be used in-class to generate debate and interrogate theory. With the “ownership” of the films by students, debate is likely to be stimulating, resulting in an excellent learning environment.

#### Developing employability skills

Many undergraduates have little or no idea of the types of careers open to them or the skills needed to succeed in marketing communications. This is especially true if the students are the first in their family to go to university, without a ready network of industry contacts. Their exposure to the working environment and the challenges and rewards they will encounter are unknowns unless they have completed a placement or internship during their studies. In this initiative, students will be exposed to the marketing communications workplace and have an opportunity to discuss in depth key employability issues.

#### Researching “Practitioner Insights”

During the conference, research into the initiative will be presented. Pre and post questionnaires will be distributed to the group taking part in the initiative as well as a control group to investigate students’ confidence and employability skills. Analysis will focus on the anticipated shifts across both groups. The “Practitioner Insight” framework is one which could work well across other business and law subject areas and indeed any discipline which has strong links to industry practice (e.g., engineering), something which will also be discussed during the conference.

#### References

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