EMPLOYABILITY CASE STUDY

The Leisure Professional – A Case Study in Using Online Learning and the Involvement of Employers to Encourage Skills in Reflection and to Support the Development of Skills for Employability

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Summary
This case study illustrates a recent initiative in a Level 1 module which involves leisure and sports employers engaging with students in online discussions concerning professionalism and employability in the workplace. The Leisure Professional (LR103) is a compulsory module on the Leisure and Sports Management degree programme at the University of Gloucestershire. The primary focus of the module is to introduce learners to the ‘idea’ of professionalism in leisure and sports management contexts and to apply this knowledge to the process of Personal Development Planning (PDP) by developing students’ skills in reflection and their metacognition. The module addresses the nature of work in contemporary environments and introduces the idea of professional work practices. It considers personal empowerment and the steps that can be taken towards maximising employment potential during a university career.

Context
The module is an important and integral part of the degree programme for a variety of reasons. It is considered pivotal to all other modules on the degree programme, including a 48 week period of paid work experience. It represents an early stage in the development of students' employability skills and their attitudes to professional development. It also reflects the characteristics of an increasingly dynamic and competitive industry in which consumers’ motives are becoming more complex and their requirements ever more discerning and demanding. Organisations continually strive for a competitive advantage, and there is more emphasis on the way the service process and consumer experience are managed and delivered. It is a people-based industry, which requires staff that understand the needs of both colleagues and customers and who can work in teams, contribute to problem solving and enhance continuous improvement. The teaching team, in designing the Leisure and Sport Management programme and
individual modules within it, have taken into consideration trends in an industry which increasingly requires staff that are:

- Reflective and reflexive thinkers
- Capable of independent judgement, initiative and who are empowered decision-makers
- Able to work within an ethos of teamwork and interdependence
- Able to offer specific vocational skills but also know how to learn and adapt to changing circumstances
- Able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and know how to plan and manage their personal and career development

The latter point provides a key element of both the module and this case study. It highlights an explicit link between the skill of reflection and the transferable skill of ‘knowledge of the self’ in the PDP process. This manifests itself in the ability to demonstrate and justify what has been learnt from others, including employers. The module therefore makes an important contribution to the development of these skills.

Objectives
The aim of the module is to provide a forum or ‘network learning environment’ in which students can construct the meaning of models of professionalism and can discuss this understanding and knowledge with practitioners in the workplace. Ultimately they are given the opportunity to reflect upon their learning in relation to personal development planning and future career planning.

Rationale
The Leisure and Sport Management programme emphasises the following features:

- A constructivist approach in which the student is encouraged to contextualise learning and to construct a personal meaning for the knowledge and skills acquired
- The development of critical thinking skills which enable students to respond to the industry challenges outlined above
- The development of common transferable skills which prepare students for a range of employment opportunities
- The skill of transferability to enable students to achieve competence in work contexts
- The knowledge and understanding of how to learn
- The development of metacognitive skills through reflection and personal development and planning
- The development of independent but co-operative learners though selective support and guidance in level 1 to increased opportunities for independent and self-directed study through levels 2 and 3

In the context of these features, the LR103 module harnesses opportunities for skills development made available by extra curricular activities such as voluntary work, involvement in sport-related activities and part-time work. It provides first year students with an opportunity to develop awareness of the reality of working in leisure in what is becoming an increasingly competitive, diverse and complex industry. It does this by explaining current thinking in relation to the
development of a skilled workforce within the sector and by identifying many issues that employers consider in the recruitment of staff. The module also considers the need for professionalism within the sector from the perspectives of both employers and aspiring graduates. One key outcome of the module is the opportunity it provides each student to become more industry-aware, more self-aware and, consequently, more proactive in their approach to career management. This is achieved by using a combination of teaching and learning activities, notably the opportunity for students to 'talk to' locally-based leisure sector employers in an online environment and, as a result of this and their other learning, to develop skills of reflection.

Learning Outcomes
The module has four key learning outcomes and also addresses the development of a range of skills. At the outset it outlines the significance of key organisations in the development of a professional workforce for leisure and sports-related industries. It also examines theoretical models associated with the term 'the reflective practitioner' and 'continuous professional development' and, within this context, investigates a range of skills required for effective employment. The module enables the individual learner to apply a growing knowledge of appropriate theory and work-based practice to their own personal development.

An important aspect of the module is that it identifies specific skills which individuals can develop through their engagement with the module. For example, students can develop their information and communication technology skills by involvement in WebCT activity. They can develop their communication (literacy) skills by online discussions with peers, employers and tutors. They can develop their skills in independent learning and working by undertaking the various activities outlined in the module. Finally, they can begin to develop specific vocational skills by their increasing awareness of themselves and the industries they aspire to work in. They do this by creating a Personal Development Plan - the ideal opportunity to engage in the practice of reflection and to engage in the skill of deep learning.

Description
Approach to Teaching, Learning and Assessment

“Successful teaching is a construction site on which students build on what they already know. Teaching requires much relevant activity from students, interaction with others, and self-monitoring to check everything is proceeding according to plan.” (Biggs 2003:75)

The module is designed around a series of lectures, seminar tasks and the use of a Learning and Personal Development CD-ROM which contains a Personal Development Planning section. All these materials are presented in a WebCT version of the module (see Appendix 1) as well as the more traditional paper based module guide. In order for students to meet the requirements of the module they must develop their skills in reflection using a combination of ‘hands on’ activities available on WebCT and by undertaking readings which are available in a module reader. Students are asked to ensure that they have undertaken the readings and WebCT based activities in preparation for seminar based discussions before the appropriate sessions. These readings and activities are clearly prescribed in the ‘Readings and Independent Study Tasks’ section of the module guide (also available online in the WebCT version of LR103). The value of this ‘blended learning’ approach is that it
combines traditional methods with new technologies, in this case by using the online learning technology available. The module provides a discussion forum tool to enable students to communicate with employers online and it also maintains face-to-face contact with tutors and employers. This blended learning approach is highlighted by Mazoue (1994:104) who states that:

"(effective) online teaching has two principal advantages over traditional classroom-based learning. It enables students to spend more time on tasks and it provides more opportunities for collaborative interaction, both of which research has shown are correlated with higher student achievement......the flexible, open-ended availability of online course materials provides students with an expanded range of instructional opportunities for acquiring, exchanging and meaningfully reflecting on the significance of information."

The module engages the students on a continuum of ‘mediated’ and ‘unmediated’ learning processes. Mediated learning has three key characteristics (Moon 2005):

1. The purpose of the learning is clear to the learner (learning objectives carefully planned).

2. A good mediator (in this case, the module staff and workplace representatives) will help to draw out the learner’s existing knowledge and use their existing frames of reference on which to build new knowledge into the current learning situation. This embraces the constructivist approach referred to earlier, in which students are encouraged to construct their own meaning around the knowledge they are acquiring and examining.

3. It helps learners to consider the most appropriate forms of learning for them. This begins to develop the students’ knowledge and understanding of their own abilities and how they learn and adapt to new situations.

The module sets out to connect students with the outside world through the perceptions and experiences of employers and through the online discussions between student and employer. This experience also begins to encourage students to reflect on their experiences. (Laurillard 2002:20) draws the distinction between “learning percepts” (natural environments) and “learning precepts” (environments constructed for learning) and how teaching should go beyond imparting decontextualised knowledge to help students achieve situated cognition (based on personal experience and reflections on it). The module embraces both approaches and recognises Bowden and Marton’s view that “all learning is in context” (Bowden and Marton 1998:140) and also addresses the increasing need for both disciplinary knowledge and transdisciplinary knowledge. The latter acknowledges the increasingly complex demands of the modern world which require skills and capabilities which cross boundaries of knowledge and are more concerned with the process of learning (Jackson and Ward, 2004). It therefore also highlights the importance of reflective practice.

"Reflective practice emphasises the use of reflection in professional or other complex activities as a means of coping with ill structured situations.” (Schon 1983, 1987)

…such as understanding industry practice and understanding personal
development planning which is supported, in the case of this module, by employer engagement.

**Early Stages of the Module – Introducing the Idea of Professionalism in the Leisure and Sport Industry**

The early stages of the module concentrate on three major issues. The first issue is associated with acquiring knowledge about employability and the development of a professional workforce for the leisure industry and its related sectors. Typical lecture topics include:

- Approaches to developing a skilled workforce for the leisure industry
- The ‘idea’ of a profession
- The contribution of key organisations to the development of the leisure profession
- Learning from experience and the significance of the term ‘the reflective practitioner’
- An introduction to using WebCT (practical workshop)

Typical independent study tasks (based on prescribed readings) associated with the above topics are:

- Identify the various types of training and education currently being undertaken in the UK in relation to the leisure industry. Draw a simple chart which depicts this framework.
- What is the role of the sector skills councils?
- What is the ILAM Professional Qualification Scheme and how does it differ from your degree programme?

**Would you consider joining ILAM as a student member?** Make two lists of bullet points in the online discussion area to record your views as to why you might consider joining ILAM and why you might consider not joining ILAM at this stage of your career.

The second issue addressed in the earliest stages of the module involves inviting students to think about professionalism in relation to their own experiences and to encourage them to use the WebCT discussion forum to express their opinions.

A typical introductory activity in week 1 of the module is:

“Think of someone you have met in your life whom you would consider to be a ‘professional’ (this could be a teacher, a doctor, a sports coach etc). State the occupation of this person. You must not identify them by name. In your notes, record three distinct characteristics / observations you have made about this person.”

In week 2 students are asked to build on their view of professionalism and their personal experience by completing the following task:

“Taking into consideration the views you posted to WebCT in week 1 and also the associated readings, how would you now define a professional? Post one example of good professional practice and one example of bad professional practice which you have experienced in the leisure and sports industry.”

The third issue involves encouraging students to reflect on their readings and to record these comments. For example, a typical activity is:
"Reflect on what you have read on LR 103 in the past two weeks. On consideration of your readings and your first hand experiences of the industry, what do you think are the key expectations of employers in the leisure industry? Do you think these expectations are realistic? Your online posting should identify key expectations and be no more than 50 words in length."

As students approach the mid-point of the module they have become more familiar with basic skills in reflective writing and the use of WebCT. Their knowledge of the professionalism and skills required for work is growing, and they are in a more informed and confident position to engage in discussion with employers. At this point students are reminded of the first assessment task which asks them to:

**Assignment 1**
Discuss the key features of ‘professionalism’ in relation to employment in the leisure industry. Your answer must reflect your understanding of the skills, knowledge and qualifications required in the sector as well as the role of professional bodies in the development of a suitably skilled workforce.

A key requirement of the assessment is that students demonstrate a thorough understanding of the meaning and application of professionalism and the reflective practitioner in the context of employment in the leisure-related industries. They are also expected to draw upon relevant literature and to illustrate their views by reflecting upon comments made in the online discussion forum by employers about these aspects of working life.

**Mid Stage of the Module - Online Link Up with Employers and Tutors**
During weeks 4 to 7 of the module, students are introduced to a number of local employers who provide a brief classroom based presentation on the nature of their work. Every attempt is made to provide a variety of working contexts by providing employer representation from both public and private leisure and sports providers in and around Gloucestershire. This is a very popular aspect of the module with students and employers alike. Employers attend a dedicated training session at the university to enable them to use WebCT effectively for the purposes of the module.

In the following weeks small groups of students have the opportunity to post questions directly to employers who represent a range of work contexts using the online forum. Students are given the following instruction and an element of monitoring by tutors is included, to ensure that the questions sent to employers are appropriate:

"Think about what assignment 1 is asking you to do. As a group, make a list of the key points you will need to address when answering this question. Each group must post at least three concise ideas about what they think should be included in the essay. LR 103 tutors will monitor your comments and will provide feedback on this activity to the group. When this activity has been completed and you have received your tutor feedback you may then, and only then, contact employers for their views. It is expected that employers’ views be reflected in your essays and these must be adequately referenced."

Students are given suggested questions to get them started on this process, for example: Where do you work and what is your role? What does..."
'professionalism' mean in the context of your work? What are the basic qualifications required to work in your sector? What skills do you look for when recruiting staff?

The following student questions and employer comments taken from the WebCT discussion area are representative of the current information available using this method and show the potential of it.

Indicative student questions:

- “With regard to employment, what would you consider to be the most important qualifications that an individual would need to work in your sector?”

- “When you are in the process of recruiting and selecting candidates what would you consider to be the most important key skills that an individual would need to have to develop and progress within the sector?”

Indicative employer responses included:

- “That is a tough question as there is no one panacea to being a Sports or Health professional. However, in my view, in order to function in this field in a professional manner I would use/expect a combination of theoretical/ knowledge based skills, practical ability and personal skills. I would expect a degree in an appropriate area and extra qualifications to back it up e.g. leadership awards/coaching/voluntary work, evidence of using knowledge gained in either written/pictorial/reference style, and most definitely build on communication skills, prioritising, time management and partnership working.”

- “Do not be afraid to be innovative/creative and make suggestions.”

- “You need to be a bit of a chameleon in terms of keeping abreast of changes at national down to local level initiatives/local politics.”

- “ILAM/ISRM/NASD and sector skills have been beneficial when I have needed to enhance my CPD. The problem is that they (the courses) are expensive and quite generic at the moment. This will change when ISRM/ILAM/NASD join up to become one agency.”

- “When employing someone I would look for the essential criteria (usually appropriate degree), coaching and leadership.”

Final Stage of Module – Introducing Personal Development Planning and its Relationship to Employability

During weeks 8-12 of the module, the focus changes to the individual student. The group is introduced to the notions of self-awareness and opportunities for self-development. Students are asked to identify those skills and qualities required for employment in the leisure and sports sectors. Special emphasis is placed upon what these issues mean to the individual in relation to their personal development planning and, most significantly, their personal action planning for the following academic year. WebCT provides a series of materials that enable students to consider their current skills and abilities against those issues previously discussed in the module. The employers’ comments provide a particularly rich source of information as do a range of resources, particularly a recent research project commissioned by the Higher Education Academy Subject Network for Hospitality, Leisure
Sport and Tourism entitled: Best Of Both Worlds: An exploration of key skills required for graduate work in the leisure and sports industry and links to PDP (Tomkins, 2004).

Indicative activities in this part of the module ask students to consider various aspects of their personal development at this stage of their undergraduate career and to share these views with their peer group in the WebCT discussion area. These activities created an astonishingly positive response to the process of PDP!

Examples of activities include:

“PDP – is it worth the effort? Consider the Personal Development Planning section of the Learning and Personal Development materials available on the WebCT version of LR 103. In the discussion area post one carefully considered opinion about what you think could be valuable about undertaking PDP. Respond to at least one other student who has made a comment. Your sentence should begin with the words, ‘PDP is worth it because . . .’”

“Links to career opportunities – think back to week 4 when you met employers and were asked to think about a possible career opportunity for yourself. Write a brief paragraph which explains how your views of skills required for working in the industry may have been clarified/challenged over the duration of the module. Identify which skills you already have and which you need to develop. Post your comments in the discussion area.”

Assignment 2
Define and give a brief analysis of the term ‘Personal Development Planning’ and indicate its significance to you and your career aspirations

The key requirements of this assessment are that students reflect upon models of PDP which have been made available to them on the module. They should be able to explain component parts of PDP in relation to their own proposed career direction and to apply basic models and theories of reflective practice to their written work.

Evaluation and Discussion

Comments Arising From Students and Employers (First Run of the Process)

Feedback from students
- Students like it – they like the ‘blended’ approach to teaching and learning and particularly like talking to ‘real’ employers.
- Meets a need in supporting students with different learning styles – e.g. shy students are quite happy to ask questions in this environment rather than in a large lecture hall.
- Students enjoy reading online comments made by other students – it improves their confidence.
- Students like to be able to retrieve information instantaneously.
- They like pre-posted lecture notes/slides - this has not had an adverse effect on lecture attendance.
- Students have to reflect employer comments in their assignments therefore need to engage with the
activities associated with the module.

• Staff who have engaged in the e-moderators’ course (associated with Staff Development for the module) can see numerous applications to their work in other modules.

• Gives tutor greater ‘control’ over individual student input on particular tasks – input is very ‘visible’ in this medium!

Feedback from employers

• Employers enjoyed the initial face-to-face meetings with students as part of the blended approach to learning and teaching.

• Employers see the value of this module and its methods and wish to be further involved.

• Some employers would have liked the discussions to have been available in an asynchronous form although this view was not shared by everyone. Those working in the public sector would have preferred a synchronous approach to discussions because of their organisations’ approach to web conferencing.

• Employers would have preferred students to have asked a wider range of questions and to have avoided repetitive questions.

Impact on Students’ Skills Development and Employability

It is clear that this module is moving towards providing enhanced opportunities for Level 1 students to engage with employers using contemporary information technologies. Not only does the approach enable greater flexibility in teaching and learning methods but it also introduces a sense of ‘reality’ about workplace practice. This approach has much to commend it in the eyes of students who are put in an informed position to think about how they might ‘measure up’ for work in the industry from an employer perspective. This has the potential to make PDP more meaningful than just another academic exercise and to really encourage the skill of reflection through discussion. The proposed introduction of peer support, from more senior students who have completed extensive periods of work experience, further enhances the students’ understanding of what skills are required for success in the workplace.

Conclusion

New Developments on the Module

Planning is currently underway to move the module on in each of the following ways:

• Development of an enhanced online resource base, to be built by students themselves.

• A wider employer base to reflect the opportunities for employment in the industry; there is much interest, particularly from the public sector. These employers indicated that they increasingly use video conferencing which could be further explored. An asynchronous facility for online discussion could be maintained for those employers who stated that they preferred this method.

• Further activities to encourage skills in reflection in the context of work-based practice, particularly peer support from post placement students who will provide online professional practice profiles (assessed in the post placement module and inserted into LR 103).

• Designing new activities within the module which manage the learning experience in the classroom to enable students to ask more focused questions.
References and URLs


Appendix 1: LR103 The Leisure Professional

LR103 The Leisure Professional

This module provides you with an introduction to those issues relating to employment in the leisure and sports related sectors. It addresses the nature of work in contemporary environments and introduces the idea of professionalism and professional working practices. The module identifies approaches to developing a knowledgeable and skilled workforce for the industry. It also considers personal empowerment and the steps which you can take during university ‘career’ towards maximising your employment potential. This will be demonstrated through the development of a Personal Action Plan.