Employability skills through Project Based Learning, Janice Whatley

This module uses project based learning to develop a range of employability skills. As part of sustainable development, Personal Development Planning (PDP) is included in the curriculum of undergraduate degree programmes, to help develop sensitive, reflective and life-long learners. This module provides opportunities for students to demonstrate their development, within a real life context, whilst at the same time providing a context for applying skills learned in other modules.

The module forms part of a Management Development curriculum, newly implemented into Salford Business School in the 2009 to 2010 academic year. The second year module described here was first delivered in the 2010 to 2011 academic year, as part of Management Development, called Live Projects. It was delivered to over 300 students from Salford Business School, studying a range of Business and Management undergraduate programmes, including Business and Management, Leisure, Hospitality and Tourism and Business Information Technology. Students work in teams of about eight, solving a real business problem for an outside client. This module is of 20 credits (one of six modules studied in the year), taken over the whole academic year, from September to April.

Employability is one of the institutional strategic aims, as part of the “enterprising university” agenda. This agenda regards developing skills in life-long learning, the business environment and entrepreneurship as key outcomes from students’ experience at university. University engagement with the local community is a strategic aim, in recognising that many of our students go out to contribute locally after graduation.

Students in Salford Business School are an international mix, many from European countries, but also a substantial number from Asia and the Middle East. English is the second language for many of these students.

Aims of the module:
The module provides opportunities for students to develop their employability skills, including their team working skills, within a business oriented environment. As a team the students are required to organise themselves, to plan and carry out projects, and put into practice knowledge from other modules of study in solving the problem which has been presented.

Salford Business School has a long tradition of using team projects as learning activities. The main features of this module are: working to solve problems provided by organisations, providing real life experience for students, teams are multidisciplinary across programmes of study, so students can learn from each other, teams have to plan and organise themselves, lectures from guest speakers provide examples in real life.

Although this module is radically different from others the students take, various factors have contributed to its success, such as the support of organisations from the local community in forming reciprocal relationship with their teams, a team of experienced lecturers who supported teams with face to face meetings to discuss progress, providing tutorials to help students with aspects such as project planning and report writing.

Evaluation and challenges:
After the first year of its delivery, feedback from the students’, the clients’ and the tutors’ perspectives was evaluated to identify the positive features, issues that prevented the aims from being fully realised and suggestions for future changes to enhance the module. This was done through questionnaires, a module evaluation survey and assessment tools.
Evidence from the first year of running the module was mainly positive from the students’ perspective. Students recognised the employability skills they had gained, including team working, project management, self-directed learning and professionalism. Because the skills were gained in a “pseudo business” environment through their partnership with an outside client organisation, there were additional benefits in preparation for their future working lives. Clients perceived that student teams were committed to their projects, and worked hard to try to satisfy their requirements and most clients were appreciative of the outputs from their project teams, giving high grades in their assessment of the teams. Local organisations appreciate what we are trying to do, and many have provided projects for the second year. Tutors noticed improved self confidence and awareness from students, as they overcome issues, evidenced also in the individual reflective reports written by students as part of the assessment.

Within teams, students were taking different programmes, so their timetables did not make it easy to find common time for face to face meetings or collaborative working, and many individuals underestimated the time needed to carry out necessary tasks for their projects. Time was initially poorly managed by many teams, but as the project progressed, improvement was apparent, as individuals adapted to a student led learning environment. Cultural differences and language difficulties led to non-participation by some individuals, as they felt marginalised, but in time this was overcome by many teams. Support from clients was variable, some clients were perceptive, and recognised the difficulties experienced by the students, whereas other clients stood back and provided little help and feedback to their team. Many projects involved information technology in some form, and in practice the IT skills taught in the first year were not sufficient for fully completing their projects, so various IT skills had to be learned by individuals from other students in their teams.

Lessons learned and recommendations:
Running this sort of module is time intensive for tutors, who need to be available to teams outside scheduled times. Finding clients willing to support the module was difficult and there was a need to allow for different levels of support from clients in assessing teams. Projects offered were all unique, and required different levels of abilities from students, making assessment problematic. Skill acquisition is difficult to assess, and there are indeed arguments against doing this. The Expo proved to be a good vehicle for assessing presentation skills, because students who did not like standing up in from of an audience were able to talk to visitors on an individual basis. It provided an excellent opportunity for individuals to articulate their learning and experiences in describing the work they had produced for their client. Some of the clients who participate need more guidance in scoping and structuring a project and the minimum requirements of support they should offer to their team, particularly the smaller organisations.

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