Woolly beard or sharp business suit? The library as a crucible for the mixing of academia and the business community

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008 De Montfort University (DMU) received funding from HEFCE to develop an employer engagement programme: the University Certificate in Professional Development (UCPD). The funding helped to develop a suite of units that combine work-based and electronic learning. Aimed at small and medium enterprises (SMEs) the programme is co-funded: employers are expected to make a financial contribution and the university provides resources and teaching expertise. The units merge training and education within a university setting and take this learning to the work environment. This gave DMU the opportunity to further develop the strong relationships already enjoyed with regional employers. The university is an established provider of 'blended learning' programmes for commercial enterprise. The employer engagement programme enabled the university to connect further with local SMEs and larger companies, presenting new opportunities and challenges alongside income generation for the university.

BACKGROUND TO LIBRARY SERVICES' PARTICIPATION

Library services at DMU were asked to create a five-credit unit for the UCPD programme. From the outset it was apparent that this block of learning must have both commercial appeal and application. It must serve to maximise existing business skills, yet introduce new skills and resources to enhance commercial success. The unit had to appeal to an identified need within SMEs and look to offer value for money and time spent. The unit required the acknowledgement, reflection and development of existing working practice and to offer the opportunity to share and develop this skills set and knowledge with others from the business community.

Arising from this background are the key concerns for tutors, students and employers:

- commercial confidentiality
- competitive advantage
- client expectation
- existing levels of student education and experience.

Consideration of the above elements was imperative in the development and delivery of the unit. Furthermore, these elements reflect the three-way nature of the learning relationship for this programme: the employer, student and tutor triad. This meant that tutors had to seek to satisfy the needs of the employer alongside those of the student. This is a potential point of tension.

In response to these challenges, we developed the unit 'Researching business information for commercial success'. This was part of the marketing and finance block offered by the faculty of business and law and was the first unit to run for the faculty, from April 2009 to June 2009. The unit focussed on the development of business information research skills, their practical application through case studies, the working environment and student practice. Peer learning was encouraged through the use of discussion boards, group work and peer assessment. Throughout the unit students were required to reflect upon their current working practices and potential changes to these practices in the light of their newly acquired skills and resource awareness.

DELIVERY

The unit was delivered via five blended learning sessions, with the first and the last face to face and the interim three delivered electronically via the

VLE, Blackboard. A third face-to-face session was initially planned but was discouraged due to the expectation that employers would favour minimal face-to-face contact or time away from work. Without the third face-to-face session the course would be easier to market but it would further distance tutors from students and make the unit harder to deliver. This reveals a tension between academia and business, where time spent needs to be financially profitable.

Realistic commercial case studies were used as learning objects to explore and exploit key business resources within a pertinent context. This addressed the need to be purposeful when dealing with clients from the business community and provided the necessary skills transfer and application from the 'classroom' to the workplace. The use of a pre-determined case study was chosen over the use of student-selected case studies, to ensure this skills transfer within the time constraints. However, student feedback showed a wish for a work-centred case study. This wish may now be answered with a longer unit incorporating both an exemplar and a work-based case study. This demonstrates another tension between academia and business, with business being target-driven and demanding tangible results against academia's acceptance of a more theoretical approach.

Other issues that illustrated the 'woolly beard' (academia) / 'sharp suit' (commerce) divide included expectations regarding student engagement, motivation and time management. The tutors expected students to read e-mails regularly, log onto the VLE frequently and engage with group discussion. This expectation needed several reiterations before achievement. The tutors accept that this experience probably corresponds with that of tutors dealing with on-campus course delivery.

Assessment for the unit was formative and conducted in the final session by peer assessment of group presentations. Although accepted by this cohort, peer learning can be stressful for some students. It also raises questions about the sharing of commercially sensitive material – another reason for using exemplar case studies within the unit.

EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

Students gave the unit positive feedback. They liked:

- compiling a business case
- easy access to tutors, support materials including Blackboard and the information evaluation questionnaire
- the fact that they felt fully supported
- assignments that were clear but not too prescriptive
- team work
- being introduced to a variety of new business sources
- internet evaluation: the evaluation questionnaire introduced useful prompts
- undertaking different research to their own work
- the transferable skills
- the interesting content
- the diverse background of groups and contributions coming from a wide range of experience,

This taught us much about delivering an assessed course via blended learning to a cohort of varied backgrounds with a mixture of motivations and commitment.

As is evident from the student feedback (above), by the end of the unit students had acquired commercially transferable skills, increased awareness of business research resources and raised levels of confidence in their application. These conclusions were apparent in the calibre of the group presentations at the end of unit.

CONCLUSION

This experience has highlighted the difference between academia and commerce, each community's expectations and working practices. For academia, learning is money and will become even more so in today's financially constrained times. For business, learning must be at minimum one step away from making money. As a consequence the need for learning to be visible and to have a concrete profitable application must be recognised. Although it is a somewhat stereotypical and 'tongue-in-cheek' analogy, the image of woolly beards and sharp business suits is used to highlight the difference between the academic and business communities: differences in priorities and values which must be acknowledged to aid a successful learning experience. Further development of this course will be informed by this experience and by student feedback.