

Pedagogy for Employability 2011

Case Study

Recognising teamwork, communication and problem solving skills: an experiential learning exercise for tutorials

Dr Duncan Quincey
Lecturer in Physical Geography
River Basin Dynamics and Hydrology Research Group
Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences
Llandinam Building, Penglais Campus
Aberystwyth University
SY23 3DB
Wales, UK
Djq (at) aber.ac.uk

Dr Mark Smith
Lecturer in Physical Geography
River Basin Dynamics and Hydrology Research Group
Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences
Llandinam Building, Penglais Campus
Aberystwyth University
SY23 3DB
Wales, UK
mark.smith (at) aber.ac.uk

Mode of learning: tutorial exercise

Student number: 30

Level of study: Level 2 undergraduate

Number of staff involved: 2

Description of Activities

While standard tutorial sessions support students for conventional academic assessments, many small-group teaching opportunities do not address sufficiently the issue of transferable behaviours relevant for future employment. A tutorial was designed to develop students' teamwork skills, communication and capacity for problem solving as well as challenging personal attitudes to working with others.

A one-hour self-contained tutorial session was developed around experiential learning materials designed by [MTa Learning](#). Several tutorial groups were invited to the same session to create a sense of competition. Student groups had 12 minutes to create a stack out of a wide variety of cleverly designed plastic components and seemingly simple rules which made the task complex to solve: no technical skills were needed, so no advantages for engineers! To be successful students must clearly define their criteria for success, plan, monitor progress, change approaches, listen, question, explain, apply logic and creative thinking, develop ideas, lead and follow. No groups completed the task in the first iteration.

A questionnaire based review focused attention on the impact of students attitudes and behaviours during the task activity. Facilitators guided the conversation but it was predominantly students who identified their personal areas for improved performance. The task was repeated, with a 15 minute deadline and the further rule that no student was permitted to touch a component until 3 minutes had passed. The resulting stacks were inspected before a final review that assessed performance against their personal targets for improvement. Students left the session with a list of behaviours and attitudes they felt they had demonstrated or improved along with action points they intended to implement as a consequence of the session.



Evaluation

A structured questionnaire was completed by all students immediately following the sessions. Results from the questionnaire indicated that specific employability skills were improved in 88% of cases and 73% of participants felt the exercises were valuable in developing personal and transferrable skills. 81% of respondents felt that the exercises emphasised the importance of understanding expectations (with respect to client requirements), and 77% felt they could better recognise the value of, and act on, constructive criticism. Students were asked to identify those skills that had been particularly well developed through the exercises. These included communication, working under pressure, negotiation, leadership and team working.

The exercise was also evaluated using small focus groups in subsequent tutorial sessions to gain informal feedback from students. Views were expressed that this non-conventional teaching method was effective in engaging participants in an issue that is often perceived as being only marginally related to the core curriculum. It was also evident that in addition to skills development, participants had gained greater skills awareness, in terms of recognising the transferrable skills that are implicitly being taught across the wider Geography curriculum. Students commented that they felt more confident in marketing themselves to employers and able to enhance their CV as a consequence.

Facilitator observations noted that the informal nature of the session encouraged an unexpected student-led discussion between tasks, and that a number of academically less-able students excelled given the practical nature of the tasks. Facilitators also recorded the development of a competitive edge between participating groups, and highlighted this, through discussion with participants, as being akin to the real-world market place.