Merging academic and practice based learning for enhanced student employability. Transferability of a TLQIS funded project implemented at the School of Languages.

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Introduction

A traditional criticism of Higher Education programmes has been that they tend to focus on the transmission of knowledge and less on the acquisition of practical skills. This dichotomy of theory versus practice has dominated our own discipline, Translation Studies, for centuries and the same can be said of other disciplines. This has had a negative impact on students' employability with employers highlighting the shortcomings of new recruits in this area who have been deemed to be "too academically or literature focused for commercial translation needs" (Schellekens 2004 : 8).

Needless to say, practice-based learning has always been at the forefront of training in certain disciplines, such as Art and Design, the medical profession, etc. However, other disciplines have been more reluctant to bridge the gap between theory and practice; for instance, in our discipline, academics and professionals have traditionally worked in parallel worlds: academics involved in developing theoretical approaches which have had little dissemination outside academia, and professionals forced to offer in-house training as a way to fill the training gaps and lack of career-awareness of their new recruits (Schellekens 2004).

The fundamental question then is how to develop academic programmes so as to achieve a merging of academic and practice-based learning for enhanced student employability.

Offering work-placements has been a useful way of providing experience of real work environments. In our programmes, placements were already an optional element, but not all students benefited from them for a variety of reasons such as financial, personal, etc. Different ways of incorporating practice-based learning into HE programmes have been developed by, among others, Chalkey(2000) suggests that "where placements are not offered, extra use can be made of both classroom-based simulation and role plays which mirror 'real world' circumstances"(2000: 30). Thus, a simulation exercise integrated in a core module was thought to provide all students with a means to develop professional and enterprise competences while also offering the best possible introduction to placement learning.

In order to design and implement our simulation exercise on Translation Project Management we applied for funds from the Salford University's Teaching

and Learning Quality Improvement Scheme. The aims were to develop and update the postgraduate curriculum; create a new set of training and assessment materials, both theoretical and practical; enhance the employability and enterprise skills of our students and improve the quality of learning and teaching in our postgraduate translation programmes. The simulation exercise was subsequently implemented at the School of Languages during 2005-06. Following on from this innovation in our curriculum feedback both from employers and alumni shows that our graduates have improved their work-readiness and a number of them have obtained jobs based on the knowledge and skills acquired through this exercise.

With this type of simulation task "the gulf between theory and practice closes because knowledge is created through what Kolb (1984) described as the 'transformation of experience'" (Badley 2000: 50-51).

In this paper we will present the many areas from this case study that could easily be transferred to any other discipline: general pedagogical models; the methodology used; the design of the simulation exercise; the assessment; and the evaluation of the project.

We shall finish with some recommendations based on our own experience of developing and implementing the project and the feedback received from all parties involved.

Pedagogical Approach

"[L]earning to be a professional translator means learning to act like one" (Kiraly 1999: 4); this was really the principle behind the new approach we knew we needed to take in our teaching. The only way we could ensure that students acted like professionals was by providing them with the opportunity to experience what being a professional really entailed. As Kiraly states: "the students will (…) have to construct their own knowledge of the profession and their own understanding of their responsibilities and rights as professionals through experience, by collaboratively participating in the authentic activities of professional translators" (1999: 4). This was, then, a key factor for our simulation: authenticity; and the same can surely apply to any other discipline. The students need to have a taste of the reality of their future professional life.

The main consequence of this approach is that, unlike what happens with traditional teaching methods, the focus is now on the students rather than the teacher; students become active participants in the learning process. They are no longer passive recipients of information but are engaged in constructing new meanings. Through experience and reflection of a social activity learners create their own understanding of the situation, they also "select or develop their own learning strategies, and often their own goals and objectives" (Winn 1992: 178). This way we are empowering students while aiming to attain what

according to Anderson should be the main goal of education: "for people to become autonomous learners" (1992: 239).

Thus, social constructivism offered us the framework for our approach, since it "emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding" (Derry, 1999; McMahon 1997, in Kim 2001). The constructivist principles which we found useful for our simulation exercise and which could be used in any other similar exercise, whatever the discipline, were: a) use of authentic materials; b) student-centered approach; c) collaborative learning; d) problem-based learning; e) process-oriented approach; and f) reflection.

Use of authentic materials

As mentioned above, the overall priority has to be to make the exercise as real as possible. By making the situation resemble the one they would find if they were doing it for real, students can learn to "think effectively, reason, problem-solve, and develop learning skills" (Dick 1992: 92). The only way we can accomplish this is by, first of all, using authentic materials; not materials prepared or adapted to teach certain elements (e.g. how to translate cultural references, in our discipline). As we will show later authentic materials and tasks can be provided by professional partners. Another factor which in our case contributed to the realism of the task was the fact that the students were given a client's brief. Having to send the 'client' a quote first and an invoice at the end of the project made the students deal with tasks which are not traditionally 'taught' in academic settings and which are rather complex: students need to find out whether VAT should be included, what the current rates are for certain translations, different languages, etc.

Student-centered approach

As we have already mentioned, this approach allows students to become active participants in the learning process, by taking control, while the teacher provides the scaffolding. In addition students develop higher levels of learning as "when people undertake responsibility to learn something on their own authority, what they learn may be learned more deeply and retained for longer than what they learn by being taught" (Knowles 1980, in Marshall and Mill 1992: 212).

The students had to create their own companies, assign roles amongst themselves, plan and keep track of the tasks, deal with problems, and be able to deliver in time the project to the 'client'.

They were supported by means of briefings, professional workshops, IT seminars, and a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), *Blackboard*, with different kinds of information on the project: module information, bibliography, sam-

ples of quotes and invoices, power-point presentations used by professionals, forum board, relevant internet links, etc.

Collaborative learning

"Collaboration as a means of testing ideas and evaluating alternative perspectives" (Duffy & Bednar 1992: 129) is also central to the constructivist view. By working collaboratively different points of view within the group can be expressed and considered, students can learn from one another and create their own new perspectives of reality. This results in personal, intellectual and professional development. Through team work, students also learn generic skills such as negotiation, communication, organisation, management, people skills, etc.

Problem-Based Learning

Many are the advantages of using a problem-based learning approach, which largely relies on the active participation of the students and on their control of the learning situation. Duch, Groh, and Allen (2001, in Savery 2006: 12) mention the following: "the ability to think critically, analyze and solve complex, real-world problems, to find, evaluate, and use appropriate learning resources; to work cooperatively, to demonstrate effective communication skills, and to use content knowledge and intellectual skills to become continual learners". We need to ensure that the situation we use for problem-based learning resembles real life because the more it does, the more chances there are that students will apply the same skills to solve other similar problems (Dick 1992: 92).

Process-oriented approach

In traditional teaching the focus is always on the quality of the 'product', be it a translation, an exam, or otherwise. With this new approach the focus has shifted to the learning process in all its complexity: cultural, cognitive, textual, social, etc. This does not mean that we can disregard the quality of the product, especially if there is a client involved, but for training purposes the emphasis has to be on the way the students approach the learning situation and carry out the task: how they plan, track, and perform it; how they relate to each other and to the client; how they deal with problems; whether they submit the deliverables on time; how they reflect and learn from the experience to improve future performance, etc. Also, if there is a clear awareness of each stage along the process and the difficulties within each stage, it is easier for them to detect particular problems or faults in procedure that if left unchecked or ignored would eventually result in a faulty product.

Reflection

Reflection plays a crucial role in the learning process: it is reflection that "enable[s] effective problem-solving to take place and that (...) improve[s] the

quality of learning" (Dewey in Boud, Keogh and Walker 1989: 12). In order to ensure that students reflected on their learning we asked them to write an individual and group reflective statement on the translation task, the usage of dedicated software, the management of the project, the working relationships among group member, the learning process and the perceived learning outcomes. The aim was to have students return to their experience, attend to their feelings, and re-evaluate the experience, since we agree with Boud et al. (1989: 26) that these three elements are important in the reflective process.

All these different elements combined under social constructivism are deemed to promote higher levels of understanding and a deep approach to learning (Cannon and Newb 2000: 9 in Kelly 2005: 48)

All of these elements merit an in-depth study, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Colleagues interested in this approach may find the references useful for further reading.

Methodology

The methodology used for developing this project has clear transferable elements. It included an initial literature review on relevant general pedagogical approaches as mentioned above, as well as key discipline aspects related to the particular simulation exercise. The aim of this review was to identify the pedagogical principles that would underpin our project.
We also engaged in staff development through attendance at seminars, conferences, and visits to other academic institutions that run similar types of projects in order to update and exchange views, experiences and ideas. Other key elements were the recruitment of professional consultants, shadowing of professionals and questionnaires sent to practitioners to provide us with insights into knowledge and skill areas required in the profession together with suitable simulation exercises that could incorporate those areas and fill the training gaps of students. An academic steering group was also set up to offer useful advice on the design of the project and on ways to ensure transferability beyond the discipline. A final evaluation and reflection was carried out as a means to analyse feedback from all parties and overall results in order to refine and improve the simulation.

Design of the Simulation

There are a number of constraints and considerations, pedagogical or otherwise, that would have to be borne in mind when designing any simulation task along the lines of this case study:

1. Number of credits: the complexity and scope of the task will depend on the number of credits awarded to keep it comparable to similar modules.

2. Teaching/Learning hours: a second related parameter to consider is the number of teaching hours required, and those needed for the completion of the task. Our students had 7-8 weeks to complete the project. This was in fact not very "real" since a professional team would deliver a project like this in a matter of days. However, there are other considerations such as the fact that students have to submit academic work for other modules as well and that if we want them to focus on and understand the process and to reflect on the task and their own development, we must provide enough time for this to happen.

3. Key knowledge & skills students need to acquire: it is important to have a very clear idea of the kind of knowledge and skills needed to carry out the task successfully so that the right scaffolding can be put in place. Here the input of the professional consultants is paramount when determining the performance criteria expected from a new entrant to the profession and extrapolating the knowledge and skills needed to perform at that level. This can, then, be benchmarked against existing National Occupation Standards.

4. Methods to train students: once the knowledge and skills the students need are identified, consideration has to be given to the best ways to teach and learn them: face to face seminars/workshops delivered by both professionals and academics for transfer of specific knowledge and IT and other skills; use of a VLE for providing extra links, information and background reading, document models, a student forum; etc.

5. Resources needed: technical, human and material. With regard to technical resources, general and dedicated IT software, VLE, etc. Human resources such as consultants, experts on the different areas involved in the project, as well as a project leader, to coordinate, supervise and evaluate the project and, if needed, an internal or external steering group of pedagogical advisors. Finally, material resources, as mentioned above authentic materials are needed, ideally selected by the consultants from or to mirror real projects, as well as other documents taken from bibliographical sources and in some cases produced by developers and consultants.

6. Actual task to be done: when deciding the activity to be carried out, the first priority has to be to make it as real as possible. Other charac-

teristics to consider are: deadlines, number of people to be involved in each group, length of task, level of difficulty, actual deliverables to be submitted, assessment, etc.

Assessment

Assessment plays a very important role within the constructivist approach to teaching and learning. It is closely intertwined with authenticity "since assessment is something that students ultimately must be able to do for themselves" (Kiraly 2000: 140), but also with reflection, as it is through reflecting on their experience that they can evaluate their performance.

Within the field of Translation Studies, the focus of the assessment has always been on the quality of the product, i.e. the translation of the original text. From a constructivist point of view, however, the focus "should be on what has been constructed by the learner as a result of the learning situation" (Duffy & Bednar 1992: 129). We can no longer use traditional assessment methods if innovative teaching methods are implemented. If, as mentioned above, the emphasis has now shifted to the process, this must, then, also become the focus of our assessment.

What is important for a successful assessment of the learning experience is that the students be part of the assessment process since, as active participants in the task, they are the ones who can provide crucial feedback on it. One way in which to incorporate students in the assessment is by asking them to reflect on the learning experience. As mentioned above, a group and an individual reflective report were two of the deliverables students had to submit for our project.

One of the main problems tutors encounter when carrying out the assessment is how to give individual grades to students when they have worked collaboratively. The solution cannot be to give the same mark to all the members of the group, as it would go against the basic principle of constructivism, according to which each student constructs his/her own reality from the learning experience. One way around this problem is through self- and peer assessment, the latter being especially valuable if "both product and process are assessed" (UKCLE 2006). There is no denying that assessing can be a daunting task and, if it is so for tutors, it can be even more difficult for the students who have had no training and whose comments can compromise their relationship with the other members of the group. Although it does not fall within the scope of this paper, it is worth pointing out that many advantages are to be found in using peer assessment (Brown, Rust & Gribbs 1994) and that this element can be easily incorporated by providing the student with a simple grid in which they rate the members' participation (as was done in our case). Social constructivism supports including self-assessment (see Boud 1995 for a detailed

discussion of this issue) and negotiating assessment criteria with the students; this last aspect however has not been introduced at this stage.

In line with what has been outlined above, the focus of our assessment included not only the final product, but also the particular components of the task which had to be submitted at different times as a means of assessing the whole process. For instance, students had to send a first report to the client on the planning carried out by the group, and this was to be followed by an interim report updating the client on the project development. Parallel reports were sent to the academic tutor with comments and reflection on learning process, problem-solving strategies, group dynamics, etc. At the end students had to send the required product and invoice to the client and to submit a reflective final group report and an individual reflective statement as well as a peer assessment grid to the academic tutor. This was to avoid role confusion between "client" and "tutor" and to better assess their client handling techniques.

Evaluation of the Project

In order to evaluate the success of the project the following tools were used and could be transferred to similar projects: feedback from all the parties involved in the project, quality of the deliverables, and the fulfillment of the original aims.

Feedback

In order to be able to measure the success of our project we needed to collect feedback from all the parties involved in it: students, consultants, and steering group. The students' feedback was considered to be crucial since they were its real agents. Thus, a questionnaire was created for them to fill in, and developers held a focus group session with each student team. A module evaluative questionnaire was another means used to obtain feedback. Through the former feedback was gathered on their initial expectations, the training and information provided, the deliverables, resources, team work, independent learning, and the outcomes of the project. The focus group sessions concentrated on the authenticity of the simulation, the realism of the deadlines, problem-solving strategies used, responsibility for different tasks, perceived learning outcomes, and usefulness of the IT training. The final reflective statement was also used as a means of obtaining feedback from the students. At consultants' and steering group's meetings discussions were held about problems highlighted by students' feedback and developers' own evaluation in order to seek advice and recommendations for improving the model.

Quality of the deliverables

One of the most important concerns when piloting a project within an academic setting is ensuring that learning objectives are met. The quality of the deliverables showed that students had acquired relevant knowledge and skills, applied them appropriately to the task, and the final product was of a professional level in most instances.

Fulfillment of original aims

As we had envisaged from the beginning, the project contributed to developing and innovating the curriculum within the SoL MA/PgDip programmes; developing a new set of training and assessment materials both theoretical and practical; and producing a model or framework to design and implement a range of simulation tasks. We feel confident that the quality of teaching has improved, the students' learning experience has been enhanced, and that our project could be used as an example of new curricular developments geared to increasing students' capability and employability.

Conclusion

When embarking on this project we set out to find a way to merge academic and practice-based learning in order to improve student employability. We hope to have demonstrated that the social constructivist approach adopted for this project is an effective way of bringing together the academic and professional worlds.

We have presented here all the elements within the project that can be transferred to similar projects quite readily: pedagogical approach, methodology, design of the task, assessment, and evaluation.

We believe that the success of this case study can be achieved through replicating these transferable elements in other similar simulation exercises. Although there might some initial resistance to a pedagogical approach that seems radically different from traditional, more hierarchical approaches to teaching, our students' feedback was overwhelmingly positive even though they had very different educational backgrounds. Students engaged full heartedly with the task, enjoyed the challenge and derived a lot from the experience developing both personally and professionally. They all rated this learning experience as positive with comments such as the following: "it encourages more independence", "… gained sense of achievement", "it makes you realistic" about what the job entails, etc.

From the results we can conclude that simulation tasks along these lines are effective. They promote self-reliance and autonomous learning as well as successful development of a wide range of professional and enterprise skills.

Recommendations

From our experience as developers of this simulation we would like to offer some recommendations to colleagues who might be interested in implementing similar projects.

It is clear that establishing solid links and partnerships with discipline related professional associations and companies is a huge asset to HEIs. Not only do they contribute to making the task seem more real for students, but they can have a valuable input in ensuring that academic curriculum matches workplace developments and requirements. In our case students reacted very positively to having experienced professionals delivering some of the key sessions. It reinforced their motivation to engage with a task seen as very relevant for their future careers.

Be prepared to become an active participant in the learning process together with the students as a consequence of their taking over the control of the exercise. Initial anticipation of possible problems is very important, but some unexpected developments will inevitably occur as they did in our project. For example, group work can be very challenging and unpredictable; students' queries regarding the task can be unexpected; students engage with reflection in varying degrees, some students may feel reluctant to take control and prefer a more passive role, etc. We found very useful to discuss the pedagogical approach with students so that they were aware of what we were trying to achieve and why.

It is imperative that academics embarking on a project of this kind undergo professional development to feel confident in supervisory roles and that they have constant access to consultants if there are unexpected developments/queries.

Do not underestimate the amount of time it takes setting and piloting a project of this nature. A fair assessment of workload required is essential. Working out a full economic costing is also advisable within the constraints of grant limits.

Help, support and advice from an internal academic steering group can be very valuable. We found that there are lots of good pedagogical practices in our own institution that need to be disseminated widely. It is likely that this will be the case in other HEIs.

Finally, the general feeling of the developers is that curriculum development of this type is extremely valuable and necessary and needs to be actively promoted and recognised if we want our programmes to be up to date and competitive and if we want to provide the best training and learning experience for our students.

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