The Higher Education Academy

Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Using reflective diaries within the context of a work and professional development module

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Course details

Course title: Applied Social Sciences

Level: undergraduate

Year; 2

Module title; Work & Professional Development

Discipline/Subject areas; Social Policy

Context

Funded Project

This case study is one of four outputs created as the result of a funded project entitled 'thinking, learning and 'doing' international work experience'.

Case study 1 describes how a team of colleagues at Sheffield Hall University added an international stream to a core level 2 degree module.

Case studies 2 – 4 review some of the teaching and learning tools implemented by colleagues delivering the international stream. These include short international experience opportunities; desk based international experience and an optional reflective diary.

Definition of terms

Internationalisation: A process whereby students are exposed to international issues, processes and influences, and are given the opportunity to experience those directly by going abroad or indirectly by staying in Sheffield., Work: A complex package combining some or any combination of the following: direct work experience, reflections on types of working and work environments, reflection and study.

Activity details

What we did

Students were asked to keep a reflective diary for the duration of a level 5 'work and professional development' module and were expected to write up their reflections at the end of semester two via an electronic portfolio after they had carried out some form of work experience or work-related activity.

Why we did it

It was very important to us that students were given the opportunity to gain experience and 'space' to think about employability. It was also important to us that students are made to reflect on their own journeys of discovery. We decided to bring these two aspects together by asking them to keep a reflective diary.

The work and professional development module was designed to encourage students to think about the world of work in terms of their own professional development and their own ability to engage with some form of work experience or study of work related activity. Students were asked to keep a reflective diary from the beginning of the module right through to the end because we felt this would provide them with a solid resource from which they could build their understanding and views about employability in general and their own personal and professional development in particular.

What we wanted to achieve

Our aim was to make reflection the main vehicle for student understanding of personal and professional development in the context of employability and work. That is to say they would become familiar both with reflecting on their own 'work' experiences and see the value of this practice for future employability.

A short description of what we did

Students were encouraged to keep a reflective diary (be that electronic or in another format) and to write entries into this at regular intervals and/or at key points during the two semesters.

There was no monitoring of this in any formal way by staff during the semesters, although staff were on hand to answer any questions that arose during the fortnightly seminar series that was part of the module. We provided the students on the module with a short set of lectures about reflective practice as we felt that there needed to be some grounding for them in this. These lectures were given at the start of the module in order to allow students to begin to think about their own development needs and how they could be addressed through the module. At the end of the first semester, students were expected to reflect on their formulation of a project and/or work-related activity. At the end of the second semester, they were required to write a reflective piece on how this project or work-related activity had gone. PebblePAD, an electronic portfolio tool they had used in their first year, was used by students to submit their work.

What worked well

- Giving students the opportunity to think and reflect on their own feelings and experiences about work-related activity has been positive in that they are given time to think about their own skills, interests and possible future career choices,

- Devising a module that combines PDP and employability is a good way of encouraging students to confront many of the 'core skills' issues they need to master, and to contemplate the possible attributes they may need in order to get where they want to go

- Some students took advantage of the opportunity to be given a 'reflective voice', and were, according to the stream leader '*disarmingly honest'* about their views on their module, their tutor and their own work-related experiences

- The use of an e-portfolio went down well with the students and staff as a useful tool to use

- Some (but not all) students found the assessment requirement of writing a reflective piece at the end of the second semester useful for their own learning

Problems and/or issues

- Many students found it very difficult to formulate a project focused around work or a work-related activity. The time it takes for students to do this task (and with a relatively high level of autonomy) needs to be built into module design

- Reflective work, even when assessed, is usually only done the 'night before'. Students, thus, did not seem to want to engage fully with the idea of reflective practice and are still to be convinced of the value of true reflective work over the course of a module

- Giving the students an opportunity to reflect openly about the module and their experience of it can open up some quite strong criticism. Staff need to be prepared for this in terms of addressing the issues raised or, at least, acknowledging that they exist

What students thought about it

- Many students seem to feel that 'writing reflectively' isn't 'proper' academic work and many felt that they were unskilled in writing (and being assessed) on these reflections because they hadn't received training (be that in the module or prior to it)

- Students would have liked more structured sessions with their tutor about reflection; as it stood, many felt 'at sea' with what they were being asked to do in terms of translating their reflections into 'meaningful text' for assessment

- Many students did not regard reflection as 'real learning' because it was something that was 'common sense' and not based on 'facts'

- All students interviewed thought that reflection would only be done by students if assessed; it would not be done under any voluntary agreement. The majority of students did not keep a reflective diary for the duration of the module, but rather, did a retrospective reflection close to the assessment deadline

- Despite finding reflection quite difficult, many students nevertheless felt that this was the 'easy module' compared to their other 5 'proper' modules based on reading and learning facts

- The lectures they received on reflection were regarded as being too early in the course to be meaningful and also irrelevant to their particular (international) stream

Key messages

- Students still need convincing of the real value of true reflective work

- Reflective work can offer some invaluable insights into how students learn and experience work-related activities

- Offering reflective assessment in the field of employability and work-related activity can be double-edged: it can provide a useful space for students to think about their own professional and personal development, yet it can be difficult for the students to re-articulate these feelings in an assessed piece of work

Related documents or links

Hudson B. & Todd, M. (2000) (eds.) *Internationalising the Curriculum in Higher Education: reflecting on practice*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.

Palmer, M. (2002) 'On the pros and cons of volunteering abroad', *Development and Practice*, vol. 12 (5) 637-647.

Darvill, G. and Ashford, A. (2006) *Recruitment and Employability issues in social policy degree courses in Higher Education* (SWAP report)

Case Study 2: Desk based students and international issues

Case Study 3: International work experience (abroad)

Case Study 4: Using reflective diaries within the context of a work and professional development module

Any other comments

An interesting issue to emerge from the introduction of the reflective diary was the students' apparent resistance to the value of reflection as a means of learning.

In 2008 it was decided that the module would be revised. The reflective element remains in the reconfigured version of this module.

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