

Enhancing Employability through Experiential Learning and Reflective Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents the experiences from both students and coaches of a project between Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Porvoo Campus, Finland) and NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences (Emmen Campus, Finland) and 50 students from the universities and 20 companies.

Year one, saw the project focused on implementing pedagogical approaches of Haaga-Helia and NHL Stenden (inquiry learning and problem-based learning) and on developing the meta-competences in the students, including ability to work in teams, leadership, project management, intercultural competences, peer teaching etc.

However, during this edition, it was felt these competences were not sufficient, the 21st Century Skills were not fully represented. The project created an international business environment where the majority of communication was virtual. The focus was on empowering students to design and lead project tasks and to be responsible for their project outcomes in the form of a reflective learning diary. Two project managers were chosen democratically by the students, after a pitch to fellow students to lead the project. To give a setting for the students to work on transversal skills, students met at Porvoo campus to finalise and present their project

Once the project got underway the students also became aware of the challenges of online communication: miscommunication, lack of courtesy in some cases or even no-shows leading to hold-ups in the research process. However, the project also showed that online communication can be efficient in international business once the different parties commit to following a mutual agenda. With the introduction of digital tools, the need of physical meetings was seen to be decreasing, however, once a physical meeting is organised, it should bring extra value in terms of human interaction. This question was also addressed in the project and this paper looks at these outcomes. During the period of physical meeting students were involved in a variety of lectures, visits and practical sessions. This paper will look at how the introduction of "Business Ballet" introduced presentation skills and body language interpretation to students.

Using Erasmus+ mobility funding, for industrial partners, the opportunity to collaborate with ExpLearn, a company that was known to them for developing and delivering exemplary bespoke experiential learning activities arose. ExpLearn also assisted in the feedback session on the student company research projects which proved invaluable for the students greater understanding of what will be demanded of them in the business environment.

The Experiential Learning activity delivered on several different levels, which we shall explore in this paper and show where collaboration with external partners can create a learning environment that cannot be achieved through conventional Teacher/Student interaction.

This paper explores the importance of reflective learning diaries in delivering on Transversal Skills through innovative learning activities including Business Ballet and Experiential Learning.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, reflective learning, employability, emotional intelligence*

1. Introduction

The research project is a cross-boarded learning project between two universities of applied sciences with an objective of learning business communication in international settings via a semester project.

The universities involved were the NHLStenden University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Finland. The project entailed a research on use of English in businesses in the Netherlands and Finland in the first two years of the project. However the instructors felt that in the previous editions "Transversal Skills" and "Emotional Intelligence" were neglected. This paper gives a description of the project and discusses participant experiences regarding the new activities added to the project. The project initiated cooperation on student level,

and included blended learning, experiential learning and transversal skills development. The Finnish and Dutch students were managed by student project managers. First, more lessons were given but soon most work was conducted in the designated student teams. An advisory team of lecturers consulted and advised the process. In the end, the results were gathered and presented.

2. Framework

The two university campuses resemble one another. The approaches implemented are Inquiry Learning and Design Based Education (DBE), and the learning was enhanced “by doing” and cooperation with enterprises. Semester projects enable learning in authentic situations and learning of subject matters, communication and languages are integrated. The presence of an industry partner was added to the project to provide students with authentic experiential learning

With the globalisation of the world economy and the increasing number of intercultural corporations, it is imperative that students both present and future, are sensitive to differences in intercultural communication which will demand a broad range of skills that are crucial to effective intercultural encounters, in this particular case virtual encounters mostly. The most significant issues being both verbal and nonverbal communication, and cultural shock. It is equally important that students, the managers of the future are attuned to the issues associated with managing and valuing diversity within an intercultural team, develop transversal skills, and emotional intelligence to increase their employability.

2.1 Emotional Intelligence

One of the new factors present in this year project is the concept of Emotional Intelligence in combination with Experiential Learning. Students were exposed to an unforeseen challenge which surprised them all, and demanded from students to put their transversal skills and emotional intelligence into practise.

According to Goleman, D. (1998) Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Though there is some disagreement among psychologists as to what constitutes true emotional intelligence, it is generally said to include at least three skills: emotional awareness, or the ability to identify and name one's own emotions; the ability to harness those emotions and apply them to tasks like thinking and problem solving; and the ability to manage emotions, which includes both regulating own emotions and those of the ones we are interacting with. More and more people accept that emotional intelligence is just as important to professional success as technical ability. Organizations are increasingly seeking this skill when taking on new personnel. Therefore, we felt the necessity to include this aspect in the project to increase students employability. Goleman, D. (1998) states that organisations that encourage people to be open and honest about their emotions perform better at establishing strong ties with colleagues (Collaboration), team accomplishments when given a certain level of resources (Productivity), the number of new and helpful ideas a team generates (Creativity), and the ability to avoid making mistakes or errors, particularly in high-pressure situations (Reliability). It seems that organisations that take into consideration employees' feelings and moods outperform those that ignore emotions and force employees to suppress negative ones.

2.2 Experiential Learning (ExpLearn)

ExpLearn has been involved in the delivery of Experiential Learning for almost 10 years and now with the ability to use Erasmus+ mobility funding for industrial partners it has increased the accessibility to fully enhance the student experience during projects https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/mobility-agreement-teaching_en.docx

NHLStenden took full advantage of this change in the funding to have ExpLearn included in their joint program with Haaag-Helia when they visited Provo. Having an Partner with knowledge of several industries and with the ability to understand what is required by the educators is one of the reasons that this program came alive in 2018. The industry Partner was able to afford time to set the back story for the Experiential Learning Activity, attend the deliveries by the students presenting on their own tasked company research and then delivering a very lively activity and feedback session on the Experiential Learning Activity.

The industrial Partner, in this case ExpLearn, brings an element of reality to the learning experience. We must remember that lecturers and teachers have spent years creating an element of trust and support between the student and themselves <https://www.tsc.nsw.edu.au/tscnews/how-to-develop-positive-teacher-student-relationships> to support the student in maximising their learning outcomes.

This means subconsciously that the student will never really be taken out of their comfort area of learning by their teacher / lecturer no matter what task is being set however introduce an Industry Partner that can communicate between industrial needs and educational needs they can create real challenging environments where time, financial and emotional pressures can be applied and removed in real time to the participating students within a safe learning environment. Within the activity itself many of the conventional Transversal skills are required as well as some of the newer 21st Century Skills that are now becoming sought after by prospective employers.

By having the industrial Partner involved in the two activities also allowed for a more robust interrogation of the participating groups with the resultant learning experience for all involved much deeper than had this been purely with the peer group or lecturers posing the questions. We discovered a more realistic “board room” scenario unfolding as the peer group, role playing as the relevant shareholders, also began to look for more detail and depth to what can often develop into a fairly superficial question and answer session led by the lecturer

2.3 Business Ballet

The Experiential Learning activities during the *NHL Stenden meets Haaga-Helia 2018* were preceded by a workshop in Business Ballet, a dance-based method of teaching business communication developed by Senior Lecturer Kiviaho-Kallio at Haaga-Helia UAS. Business Ballet has successfully been applied at Haaga-Helia for team-building purposes in multi-cultural teams as well as for teaching future business professionals embodied awareness and better stage presence. Notably, a dance-based pedagogical approach also addresses the question of emotional intelligence, since dance is a universal non-verbal language and by dancing together, people are interacting on a profoundly human level.

Today, the concept of embodied awareness is discussed increasingly much in education, however, it seems that in tertiary education the discussion is still more theoretical than practice-based. In many cases the body seems to be altogether absent in business curricula; in this aspect university pedagogies still seem to be determined by Cartesian dualism, where the mind is perceived as superior to the body.

The feedback session at the end of the intensive project week at Haaga-Helia revealed that Business Ballet had generally been well-received among the visiting Stenden students. Apparently, for many, the session had provided an opportunity to reconnect with the absent body in a novel and three-dimensional manner as opposed to the “flat screen” version of themselves in a Skype meeting.

Conclusions

All this new methodology of learning was recorded in students’ Learning Diaries, many admitted that they learnt the most during the intensive week in Finland; learnt the most about self-awareness and could understand much better why or why not they behaved in a certain way regarding team work, behaviour in unforeseen circumstances. Even though these meet ups in international projects are not always possible students should be exposed to more human interaction and not just virtual collaborations.

Many claim that students are often exposed to experiential learning through projects, internships, etc. However, this is always done in a protected environment since we want students to be successful. The introduction of the industrial partner to the project (ExpLearn) took students with the next level of experiential learning

In conclusion, although virtual communication is a great asset to business in removing time and distance issues there is still no replacement for human interaction. It is only through the personal contact of face to face meetings that we see participants breaking down cultural barriers and misinterpretations of word and deed. This is even more relevant when we introduce experiential learning activities similar to “Business Ballet” or “ExpLearn Projects” and the students discover more of their own emotional intelligence and their ability to draw on their Transversal skills”

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