2 Language in the workplace: combining academic study with work experience

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Abstract

The newly formed Linguistics and Modern Languages subject area at University of Huddersfield sought to revamp our curriculum to embed employability into our teaching so that students could understand the relevance of their subject to life outside and after university. To this end, we decided to adapt and specialise the generic placement module that was compulsory in the School of Music, Humanities and Media for our particular students to service their specific needs and linguistic skillset. The result is an innovative second year placement module called Language in the Workplace. With the help of funding from the Higher Education Academy (HEA), we carried out a research project to ensure our placement module is as effective as possible. This involved assessing our students' employability skills and needs, gathering the opinions of placement providers and employers, and putting together case studies on our graduates' employment experience.

Keywords: employability, HEA, placement, linguistics, curriculum, students, blogs, skills.

1.   Context and rationale

Recent comments by the UK government's Education Secretary Nicky Morgan (quoted in Garner, 2014) suggest that the recent emphasis on vocational degrees

has caused a decline in the understanding of the skills offered by Humanities courses, including language(s). A new discourse on the employability of our graduates is needed to inspire our staff and students and restore faith in the value of a language degree. As educators, we often tell our students that their degrees are not just pathways to careers in typical professions such as teaching and translation, but also that our graduates have transferable skills which are relevant to a wide variety of industries and roles. Communication skills, which our students have in abundance, are vital in almost every walk of professional life. Nevertheless, in practice, we have done little to bridge the gap between our subject matter and its relevance to a broader range of workplaces.

When writing a new suite of modules for undergraduates in our newly formed Linguistics and Modern Languages subject area, we realised that the second year placement module could be improved to reinforce the employability skills of our students. As we outline elsewhere[2], "[w]hat Knight and Yorke (2003) and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) both stress is the incorporation of degree subject knowledge with career development tools. [We recognised that] this – the 'embedded' approach – [was] lacking in our practice and [we needed] to work harder to integrate subject area content and work experience".

After talking to our students, we realised that they were struggling to identify or articulate the specific skills that they have, and as a result lacked confidence in their ability to apply for high quality graduate placements or careers. While they could report that they had 'communication', 'interpersonal' 'analytical', or 'critical thinking' skills, they had little faith that these skills are particularly honed in language graduates.

2.   Aims and objectives

In designing and piloting the Language in the Workplace module, we aimed to give undergraduate Linguistics and Modern Languages students a unique

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2. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/project/embedding-employability-curriculum-strategic-enhancement-programme

opportunity to apply their language-specific skills to an external placement. Guided by the module's framework and assessments, they would be invited to explore the relevance of the skills gleaned in their degree to a real workplace environment. During 2014-15, the first year the module was running, we received funding from the HEA to assess the efficacy of the fledgling module and to research how to make it as useful as possible in developing our students' employability skills for the future.

3.   What we did

3.1.   Pilot Year of Language in the Workplace module

The Language in the Workplace module ran for the first time in 2014-15 with 46 second-year Linguistics and Modern Languages students; many of these were students on the English Language and Linguistics degree programme and some studied Linguistics with a Modern Language. Given the rich ethnic diversity of our student body at the University of Huddersfield, many of our students are bi- or multilingual. The module's students were required to find and complete a 180-hour placement with an external organisation; whilst on placement, they were to analyse the communication practices in their workplace. The assessment consisted of two pieces of work:

- a written reflective commentary on these communication practices; and

- a 5-minute oral presentation analysing a particular (type of) interaction from their workplace.

Given that these students study topics such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics and conversation analysis outside of this module, they were expected to implement the analytical methods learned there to analyse language use in their workplace. In this way, we hoped to achieve our aim of embedding the curriculum in their placement experience, and conversely, employability in the curriculum.

In the first year this module was delivered, there were only six lectures delivered in the first semester, and the second semester had no contact time in order to allow the students to spend time on the placement. The six lectures consisted of advice from Careers staff on how to find and secure a placement, as well as a grounding in the theory and analysis of workplace discourse. Given that the students would be in a vast array of professional environments, from school classrooms and publishing houses, to corporate offices, each student would have a very different experience to draw on for their analysis. As such, the online suggested reading list was divided into sections pertaining to various environments and analytical methods e.g. 'classroom discourse', 'service encounters', 'branding', 'linguistic ethnography'.

In order to maintain contact with the students and support them through the experience, they were encouraged to use our our internal Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to keep an individual blog, which was used as formative assessment. The module leader would reply to blog posts, offering advice and suggestions for reading and research, and maintained her own blog about the module's progress in order to keep students informed and set the tone for the blog-writing style, a skill in and of itself.

Furthermore, having identified a lack of ability to articulate their employability skills, our students were encouraged to develop this through the various learning platforms we afforded them, including the individual blogs and the oral presentations that they were required to do as part of their summative assessment. Consequently, the students' oral and digital communication skills were developed, specifically with regard to vocalising and promoting their subject-specific knowledge and its relevance to their individual and professional experience. Table 1 includes some examples of the kinds of placements our students carried out and the range of topics they covered in their assessments.

Table 1.   Placement role and topic covered in assessment

Placement role	Topic covered in assessment
Classroom Assistant in a Secondary School	multilingualism in the classroom

Drama Assistant in a Secondary School	gender and power in school staff interactions
TESOL Teacher in a Community College	designing a curriculum for learners of English as a second language
PA to Director of an International Textile Company	cross-cultural interaction in corporate emails
Museum Guide	multimodal discourse analysis of museum displays and labels
Restaurant Waitress[3]	discourse analysis of complaints and conflict management on TripAdvisor

3.2.   HEA-funded enhancement project

The pilot year of the Language in the Workplace module was largely successful, with just some concerns about the balance of time spent in the classroom and on placement, the teaching provision and the methods of assessment. So innovative was the module, that the HEA invested GBP10,000 to fund a 3-month research project to evaluate and improve our School's placement modules (i.e. not just Language in the Workplace, but also the placement modules offered to other subject areas within the School of Music, Humanities and Media). We also wanted to explore ways of celebrating the employability skills of Humanities students more generally. To this end, we employed a Research Assistant for three months and developed a mixed methodology to gather information:

- Student surveys, employed during and after the pilot year of the Language in the Workplace module.

- Enlisting the help of a Student Advisor on our Language in the Workplace module who acted as a liaison and, in consultation with the module leader, designed her own questionnaire to send out to students,

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3. This student used her current job as a placement for the module. Due to financial and temporal constraints on students and the 180 working hours this placement module asked of them, we accept current jobs as placements. Given that they are actively applying their subject knowledge to the working environment, many students report understanding the link between their subject and their extra-curricular life in a new way. Since language is a part of almost every workplace, we feel that there is linguistic value to be gleaned from almost any kind of working environment. Nevertheless, we encourage students to seek out graduate-level placements.

which allowed students to assess their placement module and give a general overview of their experiences.

- Placement provider evaluation forms, submitted by the placement providers once the student had completed their placement.

- A networking event, 'A Celebration of Employability in the Humanities', at the end of the academic year to thank placement providers, build relationships with employers, allow students to showcase their work and future cohorts to meet potential placement providers.

- Focus groups, one students-only and one employer-only, to gather stakeholder opinions on the placement module and the employability skills our students possess, or could be developed.

- Alumni case studies, gathering and producing profiles on our graduates to demonstrate their employability skills to employers and to current students.

In carrying out this project, we brought teaching staff together with Careers staff across the university. In this way, lecturers' subject-specific knowledge could be combined with careers' employability knowledge to produce tailored resources for the students (e.g. ideas for placement environments, CV templates). Furthermore, we sought to ensure that our provision of careers advice was as up-to-date and as tailored to the students' needs as possible. As the above methodology shows, the students, graduates, placement providers and employers were identified as key stakeholders and consulted throughout.

As a result of the HEA-funded evaluation of our placement modules, we made several important changes to the operation of the Language in the Workplace module:

- *Reduced the required number of hours on placement to 150*. Many students reported feeling over-burdened with the module's requirements and quality of experience was given priority over quantity.

- *Increased the teaching time from 6 hours to 12 hours in the first semester*, including lectures and seminars where students could practice interview questions, troubleshot their CVs and discuss readings and theories. Students felt they needed further guidance on both developing their employability skills and exploring the language-related aspects of the module.

- *Made the blog-writing the first summative assessments*. Students reported enjoying learning a new writing skill, and one that is relevant in the digital age, but as the blog did not count towards their grades, they lacked motivation to maintain their blogs throughout the year.

As well as the module evaluation and improvement, several other initiatives from the project improved our approach to employability. The networking event helped us to forge relationships with employers and placement providers. The students who presented their research gave employers and next year's students a better idea of the kinds of subjects that can be explored and what can be achieved through the placement module. Several first year students in attendance met placement providers and secured placements for the following academic year. As a result of the module as a whole, at least one student secured a job offer from her placement provider, to be taken up on her graduation. A full report on the project and its outcomes is available through the HEA website (Lugea, Cullum, Andrews, forthcoming).

4.   Discussion and conclusion

The introduction, evaluation and subsequent enhancement of the Language in the Workplace module has resulted in an innovative venture that truly bridges the gap between the language and linguistics curriculum and work experience. However, in the future we would like to continue to improve the delivery of the module by developing subject-specific careers resources and placement support. Furthermore, we would like to continue to develop teaching materials that explicitly link language study with the workplace. To this end, we are piloting

and reviewing a textbook (Koller & Darics, in progress) that could be used in this module and others like it.

One of the key skills employers in our focus group identified in language students was 'communication skills'. One employer even stated that they felt that students who did not develop communication skills were 'dead in the water', and that communication was an important skill in all areas of employability, from the interview process to interacting with others appropriately in a work environment. As a result of this module, students generally showed a broader understanding of 'communication skills', and in the focus groups they discussed various methods of communication in the workplace at length, demonstrating their heightened awareness of this skill and its application. While communication is key in all work environments, our students have also demonstrated keen analytical, research, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. This module has unlocked their potential to develop, recognise and voice these attributes. Both through and beyond the placement module, we are keen to engender a more positive and enlightened discourse on language students' employability skills in general.

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