

# An exploration of 'scaffolded' and 'experiential' learning environment's impact upon students' experiences of a challenging level 6 topic in forensic psychology: MAPPA

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*Higher education institutions want to develop rounded, independent learners equipped with the required skills to embrace the challenges of post-graduation (European Commission, 2013). Vygotsky suggests learners are interdependent, born as social beings with emotional intelligence. Experiential learning is created by direct participation in life events (Houle, 1980). Learning which incorporates reflection upon everyday experience creates deeper learning, therefore this study aimed to explore the use of a 'scaffolded' learning environment combined with 'experiential' learning environment on students' experiences of engaging with a challenging level 6 topic in forensic psychology: MAPPA. The session consisted of 80 level 6 students. The session was constructed around one basic scenario about a boy called Harvey. This scenario provided the basic foundation for students to begin to explore, reflect and problem solve. The basic scenario was accompanied by a number of work based scenarios, which contained specific information. Key themes emerged around Actual Learning Outcomes; Barriers; Solutions; Experience. These themes are discussed in the context of students learning and theories surrounding learning.*

**Keywords:** Scaffolded learning; experiential learning; learning environments; interactive learning.

## Introduction

**P**SYCHOLOGY, as a subject, has become very popular due to the practical application and impact that it has on all areas of life such as education; health; economy and crime (British Psychological Society, 2013). *The Telegraph* newspaper (2013), reports Psychology among the top 10 most popular degree choices at undergraduate level in England. Forensic psychology, or at least psychology applied to the legal setting, as a sub-section and specific applied domain of Psychology has existed as a unique area of study for around 40 years (Shapiro & Walker, 2013). Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of students who have studied Forensic Psychology at undergraduate and postgraduate level of study, with the desire to pursue a career in the field. There are over 60,500 univer-

sity students studying psychology per year at undergraduate level, full and part-time (HESA, 2010). More women than men study psychology at university and more than half of these students are mature. A large amount of undergraduates and graduates also now work part-time to fund their degree course. This rapid growth of a more heterogeneous student body, that has different expectations, is reflective of both the major changes and debate in teaching psychology (Hartley, 2012; Upton & Jones, 2012).

The desire of every higher education institution is to develop rounded, independent learners equipped with the skills to negotiate the challenges of employment or postgraduate education (European Commission, 2013). Consequently, it is important to consider student's developmental

opportunities and in particular the role and contribution that educational experiences play. Piagetian (1954, Constructivist) and Vygotskain (1978, Social-constructivist) perspectives provide differing, but established accounts, of development applicable to learning environments (Miell & Ding, 2005). Both accounts are underpinned by the constructivist framework which maintains that new knowledge is understood and explored through the application of prior knowledge and experience. These two accounts differ, however, when the role of the 'learner' is considered. Piaget (1954) describes the learner as powerful, active, lone explorers who become socialised in later developmental stages. Vygotsky promotes the learner to be interdependent, born as a social being with emotional intelligences. A Vygotskian perspective, therefore, opens up the debate around what it is to be 'individual', and whether there is such a concept as 'individuality'. Additionally, a debate surrounds whether the learner is determined by other individuals or whether the learner themselves determines who they are. Some (Miell & Ding, 2005) would argue that a key component of identity formation involves the learner drawing distinctions between themselves and others.

Vygotsky maintained that learning occurred when the environment, including the input from the 'teacher', and the students potential were balanced. He called this balance the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), centred at the core of his developmental theory. Vygotsky (1978) stated that the zone of proximal achievement is 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p.86).

Alongside the interaction between the learner and teacher, Vygotsky maintained that the interaction with other peers is an effective way of developing skills and strategies. Therefore, it is beneficial for teachers

and educators to use 'cooperative learning' tasks whereby less competent learners can develop their skills with help from more skilful peers. Wood et al. (1976) referred to this process as scaffolding learning: 'Those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence' (p.90).

Vygotskian theory was first applied to primary school students, whereby each and every child should be viewed as an individual with a distinct learning style. Consequently, the knowledge and skills that are worthwhile learning varies for every student. From this perspective, the purpose of education and schooling is to create and guide development which is a byproduct of social learning through internalisation of culture and social relationships. Past experiences and prior knowledge are valuable when making sense of new situations or present experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The same principles can, and have been, related to the higher education setting. For example, a task that is set for the student, irrelevant of their age, should be pitched at the right level. Following the standard undergraduate degree structure, the tasks should be compliant with level 4, 5 or 6 criteria. If the task is too difficult, then it could be argued that this is outside of the student's zone of proximal development and regardless of the amount of help in the form of scaffolding, the gap cannot be bridged. If a task is pitched too easy then the student will lose motivation. However, for a task to be successful it should allow an individual to acquire knowledge and develop the skills specific to that individual's progress; stretching individuals that are high performing and supporting individuals that find certain tasks challenging.

Murtagh and Webster (2010) report initial findings of a small scale initiative undertaken in a modern university. This study investigated the use of a scaffolded approach to teaching, learning and assessment. A specific module was designed and

structured so that the mode of assessment (a presentation) was the focus of every taught session. Each session was strategically scaffolded to increase individual student engagement. They report that such an approach impacted on students' ability to engage in self-regulated learning and impacted positively on their academic achievement. Zimmerman (2002) defines self regulated learning in terms of the learners approach to a task. An individual who self regulates their learning approaches a task, according to Zimmerman (2002), with confidence, diligence, and is resourceful. They are aware of the boundaries of their skills and knowledge. Consequently, they proactively seek information, they overcome obstacles and they take responsibility for their achievement outcomes (Borkowki et al., 1990).

Student's education and understanding can be vastly improved by using experiential learning methods and opportunities (Hawtrey, 2007; Watts & Becker, 2008). In addition, there is evidence that university students have a strong preference for experiential learning techniques (Hawtrey, 2007; Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning has the advantage of creating higher levels of motivation towards learning from the students as well as better retention of knowledge compared to traditional style lectures. Hawtrey (2007) presents a number of experiential learning methods specifically designed for teaching economics through classroom experiments. Classroom experiments are an accepted method of teaching economics at the university level (Holt, 2007; O'Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2006, cited in Hawtrey, 2010).

Brookfield (1983, p.16) notes that writers in the field of experiential learning use the term in two contrasting ways. Experiential learning could be viewed as the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting. Experiential learning thus involves a 'direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter,

or only considering the possibility of doing something about it' (Borzak, 1981, cited in Brookfield, 1983). This sort of learning is sponsored by an institution and might be used on training programmes for professions such as social work and teaching or in field study programmes such as those for social administration or geography courses.

The second type of experiential learning is 'education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life' (Houle 1980, p.221). Here learning is not sponsored by some formal educational institution but by people themselves. It is learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience and is the way that most of us do our learning.

This study aims to explore how a 'scaffolded' learning environment combined with 'experiential' learning environment impacts upon student's experiences of a challenging level 6 topic in Forensic Psychology: MAPPA. MAPPA is an acronym for Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements to ensure management of violent and sexual offenders. Guidelines of these arrangements can be found at the Ministry of Justice National Offender Management Service website.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study consisted of 80 level 6 students enrolled on the Forensic Psychology module. These students were undertaking a range of degree courses which included: BSc Psychology; BSc Forensic Psychology; BSc Counseling Psychology; Top up degree students from various partner colleges. The participant's age ranged from 22–46 with a mean age of 24. No further demographic information was recorded.

## **Materials**

### ***Scenarios***

The session was constructed around one basic scenario about a boy called Harvey. This scenario provided the basic foundation for students to begin to explore and

problem solve. In addition to the basic scenario (appendix i) there were a number of work based scenarios based around the following organisations: Social services; Health-General Practitioner; Health – Accident and emergency; Police – Special crimes unit; Police – Undercover; HMP – Rye Hill; Probation; Local Housing Authority. Each of these scenarios contains specific information gathered by the given unit along with instructions about the policies and procedures which govern the sharing of information.

### **Procedure**

Students were informed about the planned session several weeks prior to schedule. They were informed that they could attend the session and were under no obligation to provide data/feedback for this study. However, all data would be anonymised as feedback would be written on a post-it note. Commencing the session, students were reminded of the study and they were asked to write their own learning objectives/outcomes for the session on a post-it note and to stick it onto the relevant flip chart paper. Given that this lecture was towards the end of a level 6 module, students had established a firm idea based on previous lectures of the standard that level 6 requires.

Students were then given a 20 minute overview of MAPP in a traditional lecture style presentation. Following this session, students were presented with the basic scenario about Harvey (see appendix i). Students were then assigned to one of the groups (i.e. Social services; Health-General Practitioner; Health – Accident and emergency; Police – Special crimes unit; Police – Undercover; HMP – Rye Hill; Probation; Local Housing Authority) and given a full brief relating to that particular organisation. Students were given five minutes to go through the brief in their group and try to put together the evidence that they had so far about Harvey's case. Students were then able to circulate around the other groups (visit other organisations) with specific questions or enquires

based on the evidence or information that they had been provided with.

At the end of the session students were then required to reflect upon the following three points:

1. Learning;
2. Experience;
3. Conclusions.

### ***Qualitative analysis***

The participant's responses produced qualitative data which ultimately needed to be analysed. Thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method of analysis given the type and amount of qualitative data collected. This method of analysis is appropriate when the researcher is interested in analysing the words of the participants as opposed to how the words have been presented/said. Thematic analysis, therefore, allowed participant's responses to be themed highlighting the common and contradictory descriptions made by the participants.

There are a number of different types of thematic analysis, however, they all follow similar basic steps and principles. The general view is that thematic analysis highlights key themes that flow throughout the interview diary scripts. However, Braun and Clarke (2006), Howitt and Cramer (2008), and Howitt (2010) have formulated more systematic and transparent approaches to this method. Thematic analysis, due to its broad nature and reduced theoretical 'baggage' (Howitt, 2010) occupies the middle ground between quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Howitt (2010) maintains that thematic analysis broadly consists of three main steps: transcription; analytic effort; identifying themes; and sub-themes. Each stage has a degree of flexibility in terms of the researcher going back – and – forward between stages. Braun and Clarke (2006) have provided the most systematic account of doing thematic analysis to date. The Braun-Clarke model consists of six steps to analysis. These steps are displayed in Figure 1.

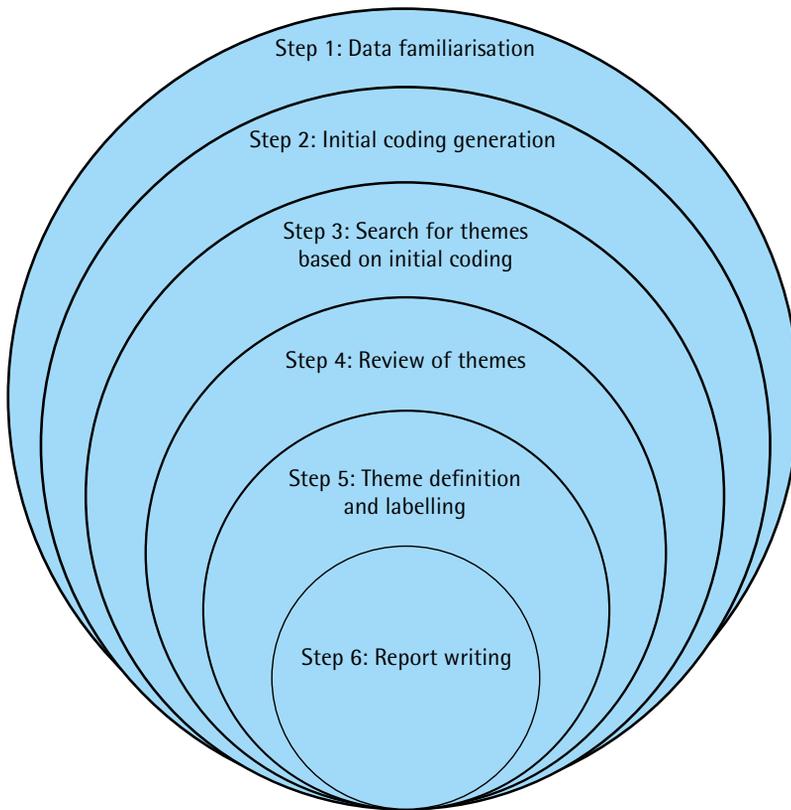


Figure 1: Braun and Clarke's model of Thematic Analysis (Howitt, 2010).

### Ethics

There were no problematic ethical issues associated with this study, however, it was ensured that students were informed about the session in advanced and that their participation was voluntary. Therefore, students were able to attend the session without having to provide recorded information for the purpose of this study. Participant's responses were anonymised in order to protect their identity. Full details of the study were provided along with written consent for participation prior to the session taking place.

### Results

The results were analysed using thematic analysis. The method of analysis was most appropriate to highlight the common themes that emerged from the participants

responses (see analysis section). The themes will be presented below with accompanying supporting evidence.

#### 1. Learning Objectives

When analysing the student's responses with regards to learning objectives at the start of the session, 52 students suggested learning objectives around the following themes:

- To gain an 'understanding' of MAPPA.
- To be able to 'critically appraise' MAPPA.
- To gain relevant information towards the 'assessment'.

To some extent these contributions map onto elements of the level 6 grading criteria and therefore might suggest that students have an understanding of what level 6 means. However, there suggestions were particularly practical with regards to applying and

utilising the content of the session towards the final assessment.

There were four further themes that emerged from the reflection items presented to students at the end of the session (Learning, Experience and Conclusions). These themes will be presented and discussed below with supporting evidence.

The first theme that will be discussed is around *Actual Learning Outcomes*. This theme includes student's reports and reflections of what they actually learnt and therefore 'gained' from the session. Students reported gaining a better understanding of the structure of MAPPa (what it is), the workings of MAPPa (what it does), as well as the limitations and issues (critical appraisal). For example:

*'I got a great deal of information from this session. I felt more engaged and it helped that the information was accessible and related to real-life, this enabled a greater understanding than normally achieved.'*

*'Learnt that... what MAPPa is used for. Authorities that are important for MAPPa to succeed do not cooperate which prevents its effectiveness.'*

*'Brilliant! I now understand what MAPPa is, how it works and its limitations and flaws. I will be able to use this in my IS and will remember it for future reference as the "learning style" was perfect.'*

The second theme to emerge from students reflections was *Barriers*. Students were able to highlight through self discovery that one of the fundamental issues with MAPPa is the barriers between organisations. Students reported that they discovered that communication and legislations were the main barriers which prevent MAPPa from being a successful construct. For example:

*'We couldn't tell anyone anything, not even the police – completely bound by our own legislation and policies.'*

*'my experience was that no one could tell vital bits of information to the people that really needed to know to do something about it. Whilst policies are there to protect information they can inhibit protection too.'*

The third theme that emerged was around *Solution*. Students appeared to have wanted to provide a solution to the problem. This is evident by students making comments about how MAPPa should be improved or reworked and general comments about overcoming the barriers that they themselves highlighted. These comments were around improving the communication links with specific facilitators, rethinking policies, utilising information technologies to try to alleviate some of these issues. For example:

*'they need to generally Improve the communication between the groups to make better use of the information gained at different levels.'*

*'I'm shocked at how policy's prevent protection, I have never thought about it in this way before.'*

*'they need to get one set database that contains the information shared across sectors, or one place or person who can access information across sectors.'*

*'what about annual meetings where information can be shared given the right circumstances.'*

*'MAPPa becomes a set agency with the sole purpose to communicate and collect relevant information.'*

The final theme to emerge from students responses was *Experience*. Students commented upon the value of experiencing how MAPPa functions in a practical session and the feelings that they expect practitioners to experience when trying to deal with a case.

*'I felt restricted; frustrated; infuriated and powerless so I can imagine workers to feel the same.'*

*'Although it was role play, I feared for my job if I said something wrong.'*

*'I feel that we have learnt a valuable lesson from this session, in many respects, but most of all about real life scenarios whereby we have to make a change.'*

## **Discussion**

Students were successfully able to set realistic learning objectives that were representative of the level of study (level 6). To some extent this is indicative of the student's ability to self regulate their own learning by recognising the level at which they should be studying, along with the relevant content that surrounds the given topic of study. However, the self regulation that Zimmerman (2002) discusses is suppressed by the system of education and the natural default of lectures and seminars. This format reduces the capacity by which a learner can regulate their learning approach to a task and demonstrate confidence, diligence and resourcefulness. Murtagh and Webster (2010) study reports how 'scaffolded learning' environments allow students to self-regulate their learning which ultimately increases engagement with the subject. By moving away from a traditional lecture style, this session allowed students to engage at a deeper level and begin to demonstrate self regulated learning through discovery, this was evidenced by student detailing their expectations and actual outcomes.

Students were able to highlight clear outcomes of the session, these were: gaining an understanding of what MAPPAs is; how it functions and the associated issues with MAPPAs as an organisation. These outcomes link closely to student's experiential learning during the session. The session was specifically designed to provide students with an opportunity to learn through discovery in a supported environment which reflects the constructivist approach. Consequently, this allowed students to be faced with an example scenario which was reflective of real-life and therefore students appeared to engage with real life issues in a controlled environment

which aided their understanding, through experience, of the problems with the organisation. Interestingly, students resulted in reflecting on 'solutions', their 'experiences', and the 'barriers' of MAPPAs. Vygotsky might suggest that the learner is interdependent but supported through the environment, allowing the student to make such discoveries. In addition, these discoveries were made by interacting with other students as opposed to interacting or listening to a 'teacher'. This is in line with Vygotsky (1979) who stresses the dynamic role of role of peer interactions and the value of a diverse approach to learning. From this perspective, the students will have achieved if they reached the zone of proximal achievement (Vygotsky, 1978). Also, the analytical skills that are involved in suggesting solutions ties into the application of theoretical knowledge to the workplace which Crowe (2012, p.62, cited in Knott et al., 2013) are paramount for employability and relevant to global citizenship. Experiential learning tasks, like the task in this study, enables students to develop the required skills that psychology graduates are expected to acquire (Knott et al., 2013).

The session detailed in this study was an attempt to combine a scaffolded approach to learning with experiential learning in order for level 6 students to experience, discover and learn about some difficult real life concepts relating to MAPPAs and forensic psychology. It would have been useful to have conducted follow up interviews to gain students viewpoints about the session compared to other taught sessions. It would be interesting to find out, for example, whether students consciously adapted their learning approach given the practical nature of the session and whether they felt as if they moved from a passive learner to an interactive engage learner.

It is difficult to assess from the data captured, whether all students engaged with the session at the same level – this is a difficult phenomena to assess even with traditional teaching methods particularly in large group sessions i.e. lectures of 100

or more. However, it could be beneficial to design a session which included a measure of engagement whether that being self disclosed or accounted for through formative assessment throughout the session. This could include an exploration of 'cooperative learning' as coined by Vygotsky (1979).

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