Experience, Competence, and Developing Practitioner Skills – A Personal Reflection on how an On-Site Community Engagement Programme benefits HE Sport Coaching Students

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Abstract

Work-based-placements are routinely considered a key element of many universities' efforts to increase graduate employability. Marrying the academic development of students with success in developing graduate and professional skills, presents challenges in terms of efficiency, development, overseeing meaningful experiential learning, and wider benefits. In this short paper, I reflect on a community engagement (CE) programme at the University of Chichester's Institute of Sport, and present multiple benefits that I believe have arisen through its implementation. These range from the expected advantages of community collaboration, increasing practitioner/vocational competence and student engagement, to others such as the pragmatic benefit of increasing employability prospects for the students. Of note, reference is made to the way in which other HE staff and programmes could promote similar good practice, and there are a number of key steps (including pitfalls to be avoided) outlined that offer a framework for possible replication.

Key words: Widening Participation, Vocational Knowledge, Experiential Learning, Reflection, Community Development

Introduction

There are a number of pillars that underpin the role that universities play in contributing to society. These include, but are not exhaustive to, the way in which universities can transform people, areas, and the wider economy in which they operate (Foley, 2004; Gibbs, 2012). In turn, each of these areas relate to the way that skills, competencies, and knowledge can contribute to innovation, aspiration, and connections within local communities and further afar. Alongside these connections, such as the development of partnerships and pathways between both graduates and industry (in great part to increase employability), a particularly salient feature of many universities is the way in which they underpin investment in many areas that are local to them. Given the significance of this, there is a continuing conversation in the UK related to how much investment in the HE sector should take place and, subsequently, the manner in which graduates can positively contribute to wider economic benefits.

Some of this is due to the existing nature of politics and the uncertainty of an, at present, underperforming UK economy. But there is also a legacy left by successive governments who focused on widening participation, increasing student numbers within Higher Education (HE) and, consequently, developing vocational competence and a more skill-based economy (Department for Education, 2017). Indeed, the idea that HE can improve lives, increase civic engagement, and allow for greater social mobility are all fundamental tenets of UK universities and the political will that positions and supports them (Pegg et al. 2012; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014).

As a result of this UK universities are tasked with developing competent and skilled graduates that can meet the demands of various industries. In simple terms, this means that universities need to bridge the academic and vocational worlds and place a focus on the concept of employability (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Minten & Foster, 2009). This, however, presents problems in that graduates are expected to possess the skills, knowledge, and intellectual/critical attributes to reflect work settings whilst

simultaneously studying at HE level (Gibbs, 2012; Ford et al. 2015). Some of these problems are consistent, such as the fact that embedding work-like skills and competencies within learning can prove to be difficult without focusing on one or both of the following two themes: a) significant resourcing and/or b) strategies and practice that maximise experiential learning. In the fashion of the second theme (strategies and practice), I present this short paper outlining the way in which a community engagement (CE) programme has been developed at the University of Chichester's Institute of Sport over the last six academic years, and reflect on the perceived benefits that have emerged.

Experiential Learning

To develop work-like skills, the concept of experiential learning is considered to be the most effective mechanism for developing knowledge and skills for occupational competency (Kolb, 1984; Groves, Bowd, & Smith, 2010). It is generally agreed that experiential learning is a process that places a premium on acquiring these skills and competencies through direct experience which, as a consequence, helps facilitate self-reflection and critical thinking. Within the domain of work, much of this is based upon learners having to problem-solve and develop practical knowledge, proficiency, and expertise. To fulfil these objectives the learner should be immersed in the work environment, and is required to be challenged and given responsibility (Miettinen, 2000; Brown et al. 2018)

Overall, in terms of good practice models, a broad body of work extols the benefits of in-situ training in order to ensure applied and practice-oriented outcomes in both teaching and coaching literature (Angadi, 2013). Moreover, the participatory nature of learning, underpinned by an iterative application of reflection, also features highly (Amobi & Irwin, 2009). However, areas of concern related to training for coaches and teachers oftentimes relate to one-size-fits-all approaches, an over-emphasis on theoretical underpinning, and normative practice/ideas that might restrict creativity and professional autonomy (Cushion, 2016).

Partnership Creation and the Community Engagement/Inclusion Projects

Universities have long recognised how community collaborations can help their core aims. Some of these are in the aforementioned areas related to local investment, job creation, civic pride, and raising aspiration, and it is in this context that the present paper operates. To meet these types of needs, universities invariably look to extend their connections into the community (Shannon & Wang, 2010). The University of Chichester is no different in this respect and has embedded a variety of initiatives, and placement supervision, across various programmes and disciplines within the local community. Added to this, the University of Chichester keenly engages with the ethos of University-community partnerships in a number of ways, and the CE programme that this paper focuses on reflects this well. Furthermore, the CE programme, whilst principally for sport coaching students, is one which helps students develop and fine tune their coaching and management skills through experiential learning.

This CE was developed with a specific remit that sought to do two things. First, to reduce administrative costs and increase the quality of provision and experience for students; two areas that can sometimes be associated with overseeing external placements. Simply put, travel and time expenditure multiplies with off-site visits and placements, and students have been proven to enjoy practical application and new contexts for motivation (Johnson et al. 2017). And second, to solve some of the areas that the vocation of sport coaching identifies as needing improvement for graduates in the UK. Examples of these include the demand for graduates to be proficient in teamwork, practical and technical skills, communication, and problem solving (SkillsActive, 2009; SkillsActive, 2010a, SkillsActive, 2010b; Crisp, 2018). Clearly, because of the fact that they are specifically based within the realm of work competency itself, any effort to develop these work-like skills requires partnerships with a variety of employers and opportunities for students to undertake work-based-placements (WBP).

In the Institute of Sport at the University of Chichester, there are a variety of contacts with local schools and providers that can accommodate the students on the various sport programmes offered. The benefits for all parties works both ways, and many providers have profited from students placed on WBP in their organisations. Collectively, there are a range of initiatives and providers that the students at the University of Chichester can be involved with, and these are overseen by several placement coordinators (across various institutes and departments).

The example that this paper focuses on, however, lies principally within the mechanism of a coaching placement module that takes place over an entire academic year, but also includes other programmes and cohorts. For instance, for the last two academic years another module (in sport science and coaching) that also takes place over the whole academic year has combined with the coaching placement module so that two different cohorts can benefit from the CE programme. The fundamental difference between this CE and the existing variety of WBP opportunities on offer at the University, and its key features, is that it includes a variety of on and off-site initiatives that take place within curriculum time. The module in which the CE programme runs operates at Level 5, and the students are, for the most part, what can be termed 'beginner-coaches'. This is because the majority do not possess formal coaching qualifications, and also do not have any significant experience in coaching outside of the educational context.

Overall, it is the development of real coaching competence that underlines the philosophy of this CE. At its heart, this philosophy positions that the deliberate extension of coaching knowledge and expertise is required - one that facilitates a shared understanding that can be developed through a range of coaching environments. In short, it is the need for sport coaching students to develop their skills, competencies, and crucially in the field of experiential learning, the ability to critically appraise their own performance, that drives this CE programme.

The CE programme started in the 2014/15 academic year with the help of Out There, a charity that offers support for people with learning disabilities. Whilst some

students had previously completed their coaching placements with Out There in the two years previous, 2014 heralded the development of a six-week programme for students to oversee on-site. The following outlines the significant events and progress of the last six years.

Academic year 2014/15

The first programme partnered with a local special educational needs (SEN) school and this programme was replicated a further two times in 2014/2015. It was complimented in March 2015 with the delivery of a cricket disability day in partnership with Out There, Active Sussex (the county sport partnership), and Sussex County Cricket Club (the local professional cricket team). This event saw approximately 200 participants take part in a day tournament at the University of Chichester and gained good local press.

Academic year 2015/16

In total, 10 disability sport sessions took place before Christmas 2015 providing for a range of out-reach groups (such as day care provision for vulnerable people) and Chichester College (the local Further Education provider).

These sessions continued throughout all of 2016 and were further complemented through the academic year by a range of disability sport provision sessions run on the University of Chichester campus by Albion in the Community (AITC – *the charity arm of Brighton and Hove Albion Football Club***)** that a number of sport coaching students supported.

Academic year 2016/17

A Boccia (a disability sport) tournament joined the existing programme provision with over 70 people attending, the links with Chichester College were extended, and by the end of the year a further link with a local primary school also commenced.

Academic year 2017/18

Continuation of on-site CE sessions with Chichester College, the same local primary school, and several out-reach groups.

Academic year 2018/19

Continuation of on-site CE sessions with Chichester College, the same local primary school, and several out-reach groups.

Academic year 2019/20

Continuation of on-site CE sessions with Chichester College, the same local primary school, and several out-reach groups.

In total, over 100 sport coaching students at the University of Chichester have benefited from these on-campus coaching opportunities over the last six academic years, with a throughput (basically the total amount of session attendances) total of approximately 3,600 at time of writing, with the AITC programmes taking place weekly adding significantly to this number and therefore creating a combined throughput total of over 5,500 overall.

Benefits and Additional Applications

As stated previously, the fundamental philosophy behind the CE programmes was to develop the professional competencies of the sport coaching students through coaching non-peer groups. This has been, so far, highly successful and I have published several pieces of work that illustrate the positive impact that the students have accrued in coaching SEN groups (Crisp, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Moreover, on reflection, it is possible to see that many of the students have benefited from some of the previously mentioned 'good practice' models for improving teaching and coaching, such as practice-oriented outcomes, focusing on a participatory nature of learning and subsequent reflection, and allowing for creativity.

However, I also acknowledge my past experience of having worked in community sport and youth work. This being so, the intention of the CE programmes was, aside from offering an opportunity to experience real world coaching and to reduce the possibly higher costs incurred with off-site placements, to further the students' understanding of community matters. An additional benefit related to this was that, subsequent to the students' understanding and actual involvement in community matters, the development of their CVs could be brought to life and extended. This ethos of building the students' CVs underpinned, and had the additional benefit of proving, how the University of Chichester was working in partnership with other

institutions and providers. In essence then, the CE programme could, and did, help contribute to the University of Chichester's strategic plans and targets in respect of active engagement with employers, recognising (and acting upon) the reciprocal nature of partnerships, and making an effective contribution to the development and enhancement of the local community and across the University.

In no particular order, the manner in which some of this ethos of community involvement can be seen through concrete outcomes is now presented. Of note, the CE programme facilitated additional placement opportunities (i.e. at Chichester College and Out There, AITC, local primary schools) on other days for the students to take part in. There was also, at times, an increase in local publicity with respect to what the University of Chichester and their students were doing and the benefits that were accrued by both students and participants (i.e. the day long festivals in Cricket and Boccia).

From the student perspective, one of the interesting things that came about (and something that fits in with the literature/research that has previously been mentioned i.e. Crisp, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), was that many of the students involved in the CE programme believed that their experience of coaching school children and disability groups benefited their wider coaching skills. Much of the findings that support this statement were illustrated in consistently powerful student reflections, testimonials, and evaluations that I accrued over the course of the CE programme. Moreover, as expected, the students have also directly benefited from developing their CVs with practical, tangible examples of having worked with various groups (i.e. primary school children, FE college students, SEN participants, and even older populations), in community matters, and in conjunction with several professional bodies.

What is also interesting, from my perspective, is that as a course leader who has to write references, in general for sport coaching related jobs and in particular for education type appointments (including, importantly, the applications for teacher training i.e. PGCE), this became easier in terms of illustrating the students'

experience and capabilities. I personally acted as a reference for a number of students applying for a variety of continuing, postgraduate education courses (where I would see their personal statements), and can attest to the manner in which students had crafted these statements with specific reference to their experiences of the CE programme. In effect, the CE programmes made them better candidates for education type roles and more employable in general. At the least, the case is that many students directly reference their experience with the projects and as such, there is an evidence trail that supports the usefulness and pragmatism of running these projects from the student perspective.

Implementation Strategies

Whilst this paper has outlined a number of positive elements to the CE programme, and has also demonstrated a range of benefits that were accrued across the last six academic years, in practice this has required some thought and constant reflection in order to make it as efficient as possible. Perhaps of most note, consideration to resourcing (programme management) and partnership work has been key. Much of this has been undertaken by myself in my role as the main module coordinator and, de facto, CE lead. However, the University of Chichester has also supported the CE programme by providing financial assistance for some of the more specialist training (in particular for SEN activity and coaching) that Out There have provided. Moreover, provision for parking, access to the University, and even helping write some of the press releases are all areas in which the University of Chichester has supported the CE programme.

Additionally, it has also been necessary to tackle the nature of student engagement and attendance. Within the UK, most universities do not offer credit for attendance and, as such, oftentimes non-mandatory elements of courses may prove to be poorly attended in some courses. In the example shown in this short paper, directly embedding the CE programme into contact time within the modules the students were taking proved key. However, prospective CE leads for other universities keen on replicating the success of the one outlined in this paper, must be mindful of burn-

out and disinterest from the student cohort. The reality is that keeping a balance between CE projects, the hours that these necessitate, and the specific training for certain population groups that is necessary (i.e. that perhaps sits within the domain of participation and inclusion coaching), can sit at odds with what many student-coaches see as 'traditional' sport coaching with its emphasis on winning and performance type outcomes. Contextualising the importance of coaching 'others', outlining the difficulties that can be presented (and thus overcome in order to improve overall ability), and fundamentally explaining these in the context of improving coaching through incrementally challenging the student-coaches is necessary.

However, given the nature of many student-coaches and their own individual choices, preferences, and even the cultural domain within which sport coaching sits (oftentimes equated with performance and podium type sport), then other sessions, challenges, and contexts must be provided in order to maintain focus. In the last six academic years of the CE programme this short paper outlines, there have been other, interspersed sessions presented to the students. In essence, masterclasses and a coaching toolbox have formed part of the overall delivery, with various sport professionals, guest coaches, and different sport coaching contexts presented. In truth, without this provision of wider coaching contexts the CE sessions could overpower certain modular or programme intentions and reflect other, more specialised, forms of coaching and some of the programmes that exist for these (i.e. specific disability or even community sport type coaching pathways). Given this, maintaining a broader focus of coaching has been essential to ensure student engagement and satisfaction over the last six years. Put simply, the students that have taken part in the CE programme that this paper presents were sport coaching students interested in a variety of coaching domains, and thus necessitated a wider provision of activities and coaching contexts alongside the inclusion type work.

Conclusion and Implications

Embedding employability skills within HE programmes has become a perennial target for UK universities (Gibbs, 2012; Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2015). Much of this is driven by the demands of various skills sectors, and it is already understood that one of the most important mechanisms to bridge the theoretical and practitioner divide is to focus on experiential learning. But we must be mindful that the importance of engaging with this method of learning can present a number of problems, chiefly with costs that can be incurred, and also in terms of proper management of the student experience. The CE project in this short paper has managed, through some careful supervision and the development of partnerships and a network of helpful providers on and off-campus, to address this problem by overseeing much placement work on-site. The benefits that have ensued from this are that experiential learning can be overseen and facilitated, and a number of ancillary benefits have also emerged which revolve around the development of experience that can be used in future student endeavours (for instance, applications for working in sport coaching or education).

Through reflection on the last six years of the CE programme this short paper has outlined, the manner in which similar CEs might be best implemented is seen in the following steps: foster partnership work and development; focus on professional knowledge and competencies; embed CE programmes in curriculum; develop holistic approaches to course content; focus on experiential learning and tangible outcomes; avoid an over-focus on inclusion/CE type matters and possible subsequent burn-out; and ensure that post CE programme benefits are visible from the student perspective. For the most part, these steps and the possible delivery of similar CE programmes (and any subsequent benefits) do not have to be exclusive to student coaches. There are other fields within HE education, for instance teaching, childcare, personal development, and business project management, that might profit from overseeing onsite experiential episodes.

Acknowledging that this is a reflective piece, I feel that outside of the aforementioned need to properly plan, invest in (principally through staff resourcing), and manage these kind of CE models, there are a number of benefits that can be accrued. Indeed, as HE institutions continue to juggle the dual necessities of increasing student employability and increasing civic/local engagement, strategies for doing so need to be explored. In so doing, a critical eye needs to be cast upon the extent to which any potential project is successful. Cost effectiveness plays a part, of course, but the matter of ensuring quality provision and maximising student experience is also paramount.

In the CE programme outlined here, managing expectations and increasing student satisfaction has been incrementally driven by minor iterations to the course, the CE content, and the systems of delivery and management. All told, this short paper outlines my reflections on six years' worth of practice and demonstrates how other HE institutions may best replicate what has, and continues to be, a successful and on-going initiative.

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Statement

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