Title:
Tutoring for student employability using a coaching/mentoring approach: a collaborative action research study

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As the Higher Education ("HE") sector in the UK enters an era of turmoil and uncertainty, new ways of engaging, enhancing and facilitating student learning and performance is required, particularly to support work-based learning and employability for both national and international students. The New Zealand HE system (the tertiary sector as it is commonly known) has many similarities with the UK; in particular a growing number of international students. This working paper addresses the question of how work-based learning and employability skills can be most effectively supported by lecturers, with a proposal for a collaborative action research study to explore a specific tutorial model in this regard.

This collaborative action research study will explore the use of a newly developed tutorial model based on coaching and mentoring, created specifically to support student employability. The model was created collaboratively with 23 tutors who are currently implementing the model in the University of Hertfordshire ("UH") and includes the role of coaching/mentoring in the process of student tutorials. The aim is to source funding for this research study in which tutors and the students will be researching together. In the meantime, a project is being funded by UH in which the tutorial model is being evaluated and the results of this project will be available to be presented at the conference in June 2013.

The undergraduate module, ie the research context, is Industry Practice which is a compulsory work-based learning module for final year undergraduate students at UH. Veronica Earle is the Module Leader, Janice Cook is a member of the development team specifically recruited to help develop the tutorial model, and Carolyn Ward is a Lecturer at Auckland University of Technology interested in a global research partnership for her academic work in New Zealand. The paper explains the importance of the research, the proposed research design (including the ethical challenges and the current theoretical base), and some initial evaluative findings. Also included are some potential implications for practice.

Importance of the research

Following the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills document “Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value” (2008), universities in the UK have been encouraged to treat employability as a core part of their mission and take responsibility for how their students are prepared for the world of work. Many authors have explored the different approaches to teaching and learning for employability and work-based learning and all are in agreement that the traditional university lecture/seminar teaching model is not appropriate (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Ovens, 2011; Hager and Holland, 2006; Graves and Maher, 2008; Bond and Symes, 2000; Buswell and Becket, 2009). As
Bond and Symes (2000) state, “an obvious trap is applying existing pedagogies to the supervision of work-based learning”. The research team is therefore seeking a model that is effective in the support of work-based learning in an HE environment.

As Bond and Symes (2000) suggest, work-based learning puts an important new focus on learning as distinct from teaching. Successful approaches include a shift away from the delivery of content, to workshops with smaller groups that give students the opportunity to talk. Ujma et al, 2009 and Bond and Symes, 2000 find courses are becoming more like investigations and the activities in which staff engage are more like research supervision. Facilitation, networking, brokerage and negotiation are all essential parts of the tutor’s skill repertoire according to Knight and Yorke (2004) who also recommend mentor support for work-based learning.

Tennant (2000) sees the tutor taking up a number of roles including an arbiter of knowledge, a guide to assist the learners to learn from experience, a monitor of performance, a facilitator of the process and a critical commentator. We see the coaching and mentoring model we are applying as addressing several of these roles: the mentor, guide; the coach, facilitator.

With regard to coaching there appears to be limited literature in an HE environment although the work of Hamman et al (2000) in an American middle school could be drawn upon for this study. In respect of mentoring, the literature is more prevalent in the field of education and the work of Behar-Horenstein et al (2010) from the University of Florida looks at the concept of partnership between a professor and a student which could also be relevant for this study.

New Zealand has put considerable resources into evaluating learning outcomes and results, for example e-learning (Marshall, 2005) as well as first year student experiences. With regards to tutorials and the use of a mentoring/coaching model there does not appear to be any available research, hence making this a unique opportunity to add to what has already been researched and to potentially add to the work of Waters (2009). The contribution of this research at an international level (New Zealand) is particularly important because research by Waters (2009) on an MBA programme suggests a lack of research when addressing international dimensions of HE and graduate employability.

Knowledge-based economies are reliant on workers having a wide repertoire of attributes/skills/competencies, which the HE sector refers to as employability skills which their students must possess and which employers demand. Hager and Holland (2006) suggest a strong association must exist between the development of generic attributes by learners and teaching and learning methods which our tutorial model attempts. An outcome of this association is the creation of a number of particular features and those relevant to our research are:
• Holistic approaches to learning
• Problem-based learning
• Life-long learning skills
• Learner reflection, evaluation and articulation on learning experiences as a critical aspect of the learning process
• The teacher assuming multiple roles, such as mentor, coach, facilitator, evaluator

They also suggest the inclusion of demonstrating modelling the generic attributes to learners (Hager and Holland, 2006:8).

With regard to coaching and mentoring specifically, since the 1990s coaching and mentoring have developed as professional disciplines with more prevalent use in organisations (CIPD, 2012), attempting to improve individual performance and enhance organisational success. Coaching and mentoring research is fairly recent and empirical research on evidence-based effectiveness is gradually evolving. The study will explore to what extent coaching and mentoring can support work-based learning and enhance student employability.

Research design

An epistemological and ontological position of social constructivism will be adopted in this experiential based research study. Meanings will be constructed as students and tutors engage with the world they are interpreting and the generation of knowledge will be both social and inductive (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2009); underpinned by a philosophical belief that meanings are created out of experience.

The key experience in the study will be the experience of both students and tutors in tutorial sessions which are a key element of the Industry Practice module. The focus of the research is whether or not coaching/mentoring skills are enabling students to learn more effectively from their work experience, and then transfer and sustain their learning outside the tutorial sessions.

This research aims to contribute to student employability and learning theory with the development of a tutorial model which enables the transfer and sustainability of learning outside the tutorial experience, through the exploration of our tutorial practice. These elements create a sense of action and change required from the tutorial process. The concepts of practice, action and change are strong indicators that action research is the ideal research method. As our experience as tutors and researchers, together with the experience of the students being tutored, forms a substantive part of the research, a research method which has the flexibility to be collaborative in nature is also required. This will help maximise the range of experience from which meanings can emerge and be analysed, specifically in respect of the transfer and sustainability of learning. Taking this analysis into
account, collaborative action research specifically seems to provide the most appropriate and helpful research method for this study.

Reason & Bradbury (2006, p.1) state that action research “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.” It is therefore important for the research design to include all these four elements. In particular, reflection needs to be included. This approach aims to encourage students to evaluate their working experience, make changes to their practice and therefore improve their chances of employability through the ownership of the changes. Work experience can mean paid or unpaid work.

It is intended that this will be a longitudinal study, commencing with two collaborative action research cycles in the academic year 2013/14, with two further action research cycles the following academic year 2014/15. The key elements of each of the first two cycles are illustrated in Figure 1 below, based on the Cook (2010) collaborative action research model developed for coaching practice research. They are:

- Our dual role of tutor and researcher which means, on occasions, a separation of these roles in situ. For example, during data collection activities having a primary focus of researcher
- The dual role of student being tutored and collaborative action researcher
- One data collection method: research diaries completed by both tutors and students collaborating in the study throughout the research relationship and shared in discussion
- Another data collection method: feedback provider sessions led by the students in their place of work (although this may not be practically possible and alternatives may need to be explored)
Figure 1: Developing a tutorial model from researching tutorial practice based on coaching/mentoring skills, through collaborative action research based on Cook (2010)

The research participants will be recruited on a voluntary basis. The tutors will be recruited on the basis that they:

- will be tutors on the Industry Practice Module for both Semesters A and B in the 2013/14 academic year to ensure consistency throughout both action research cycles
- need to commit to the collaborative action research process for the same period including the completion of a reflective diary

The students will be recruited in accordance with the following criteria:

1. students for the whole 2013/14 academic year, Semesters A and B
2. have work experience (paid or unpaid) in place for both Semesters A and B and commit to finding work experience should this finish unexpectedly
3. commit to the collaborative action research process for both Semesters A and B in order to develop as researchers

Research purpose
The purpose of the research is to explore through collaborative action research the use of coaching/mentoring skills in undergraduate student tutorials in the context of student employability, with a focus on reflective learning and the transfer and sustainability of learning outside the tutorial experience. The study will benefit from
being longitudinal, spanning two academic years of implementation in order to ensure a robust action research methodological approach as well as to enable data collection in respect of sustainability of learning over time.

Research questions

- Are coaching/mentoring skills enabling students to reflectively learn from work experience, to transfer and sustain the learning outside the tutorial experience?
- Are coaching/mentoring skills enabling student employability?
- And in what way?

Research aims/objectives

The model was developed in an attempt to reconcile the need to provide a learning environment for students that supported very different work experiences, with the need to operate within the normal resource constraints of an HE environment. In addition the teaching and learning method adopted had to support students to become independent reflective learners. The research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching and mentoring approach in supporting students’ reflection on work-based learning and enhancing future employability. Changes will be made in response to our learning and the effect of these changes further evaluated. Ultimately we aim to produce a model that is both effective at supporting work-based learning and employability and efficient in terms of teaching resource constraints.

The research objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the staff experience of using the model based on coaching and mentoring
2. Evaluate the student experience of the model
3. Make improvements to the model after each action research cycle and evaluate during the next cycle
4. Create a tutorial model for employability based on coaching and mentoring

Research design challenges - ethics

Herr and Anderson (2005, p.69) describe the action research process as “designing the plan while flying it”. Whilst experience suggests this to be the case, the anticipation of ethics challenges, including issues of power, is a crucial element of the preparatory stage for the action research study. Cook (2010) suggests four elements are needed to create a strong ethical environment in collaborative action research (Figure 2). The only element not relevant to this study is the doctoral supervision as this research study is not part of doctoral level study, although some form of research supervision will be beneficial.
Surface considerations are standard protocols such as informed consent and confidentiality. The key non-surface considerations are: managing the power relationship in action research with understanding the self as a key component. Reflexivity is a helpful approach. Therefore, tutor practitioner researchers should be able to capitalise on their knowledge and understanding as a practitioner into the role of researcher highlighting the importance of coaching supervision being a specific component of the research design. This supervision is an important element in creating a strong ethical environment and therefore it is intended that tutors will receive coaching supervision during the action research cycles.

In addition to surface and non-surface considerations, the researcher needs to identify and analyse the ethical issues specific to their collaborative action research study. This situational analysis will ensure that any specific issues have been analysed and solutions found to attempt to resolve any ethical challenges; for example, the ethical challenges surrounding the feedback provider sessions in the working environment or whatever alternative is employed.

**Initial tutorial model for the first collaborative action research cycle**

It is implicit in this qualitative research where meanings are being created out of experience, that previous experience not only exists but also plays an important part in the new experiences being created as a result of the collaborative action research process. Below is the tutorial model developed with tutors over the summer of 2012 and implemented for the first time in the academic year 2012/13 (Figure 3). Below is
a description of the theoretical base for this model as well as some initial evaluative findings from 2012/13.

Figure 3: Coaching/mentoring model for student tutorials, Cook, J.A., Earle, V. (2012, authors’ own)

Theoretical base

In light of the differing knowledge and experience of coaching and mentoring among the module tutors, the development of the tutorial model drew on the early work of Gallwey (2000) and Greek mythology in respect of derivations and definitions of coaching and mentoring respectively. Gallwey (2000) suggests that “unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance….helping them to learn rather than teach them” is an effective coaching style. Greek mythology with Odysseus entrusting the education of his son Telemachus to his friend Mentor saying “tell him all you know”.

It was agreed collaboratively to draw on both the similarities and differences in the literature, working with both coaching and mentoring, as per the above definitions, in the tutorial model. This combined non-directive (coaching) and directive (mentoring) approach to tutorials appeared to suit the learning environment. The directive approach is appropriate in an environment where the tutor’s role is to share knowledge and experience, as well as guide students towards additional help and resources relevant to their work experience and the module assignments. The non-directive approach (which seemed to be the lesser common style in the prior experience of the tutors) which facilitates learning through reflective and other learning processes.

As the model developed, the collaborative nature of the tutor/student relationship grew stronger in importance. Therefore the tutorial model (Figure 3) also draws on the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011) model (Figure 4) and therefore also informed the development of the tutorial model. This model has two key significances: 1) it contains both individual and joint responsibilities for the tutors and students (it was agreed that there needed to be a collaborative approach between tutor and student for the reflective learning process to have a chance of success), and 2) it is a model for enabling the transfer and sustainability of learning through coaching (important to student employability following their departure from university). The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) was developed through a collaborative action research process.
Figure 4: Transferring and sustaining learning through coaching: a collaborative action coaching model for coaching leaders (Cook, 2011)

Tutors were trained in the coaching/mentoring theoretical base as outlined above as well as practical coaching and mentoring skills based on the seminal work of Clutterbuck and Megginson (1999), Kolb (1984), Parsloe (1995), Rogers (2008) and Whitmore (2002), particularly with regards to contracting with students and tools/techniques for use during tutorial sessions with students.

Initial evaluative findings

An evaluation of the tutorial model is being funded by a small UH Business School Learning and Teaching Grant. At the time of writing this evaluation project is underway and the results will be presented at the UH Business School Learning and Teaching Conference on 4th June and at the 2013 UFHRD International Conference later that week.

Initial evaluative findings come from formal and informal feedback from both staff and students from a variety of sources, eg discussion at staff meetings, staff and student conversations, staff and student blogs, staff and student on-line discussions and student course committee meetings.
Staff Findings
In the first few weeks of the module staff feedback and queries related to the module in general and the process of implementing the small tutor groups for example:

- Where to find information and support
- How does the assessment work?
- What makes good examples of work-based learning?
- How does the eportfolio work?
- How to set up student blogging areas
- What is a wiki?

As staff familiarised themselves with these aspects there was more discussion about the content of each session and how to facilitate greater, and more reflective student inputs. For example:

- Asking for and sharing examples of reflective writing
- Advising each other on the best ways to structure the sessions so that students participate more
- Sharing experiences of ‘good’ sessions.

Towards the end of the first semester (11 weeks) feedback indicated that tutors were more comfortable with their roles and facilitation skills, and those students that attended seemed to value and contribute to sessions. However concern had turned to attendance which had dropped off to very low numbers, with some sessions unattended.

Student Findings
Much of the initial student feedback from on-line discussion and course committee meetings was negative. It included:

- Confusion over module purpose; many students did not see the point of a work-based learning module
- Confusion over the delivery approach, which was very different to the normal approaches used at UH Business School

In general students were not contributing to sessions, expecting tutors to do most of the talking and attendance was dropping off as the semester progressed.

However, although most of the attention focused on this negative feedback, not all students were having this experience. More positive feedback tended to come from students who were engaged and attending:
• Students could see the value of the module for helping them finding work, gaining a good grade and getting recognition for their work-based learning, (particularly students who had experienced a one-year placement away from university)
• These groups were building up a good rapport by week 7, they were engaged and sharing examples of their work-based learning
• Many groups were enjoying good discussions

Potential implications for practice

Through the exploration of the use of coaching/mentoring skills in undergraduate student tutorials and the involvement of students in the research process, the practice outcomes of the research study are:

• a tutorial model which enables reflective learning
• a tutorial model which enables the transfer and sustainability of learning outside that experience
• the development of students as researchers
• the development of reflective learning skills in both tutors and students for professional development purposes
• a model of tutor development for CPD purposes

It is envisaged that the lessons learned will be invaluable to both scholars and practitioners within the field of student learning and coaching/mentoring, the involvement and enhancement of students across nations and a response to the growing trend of international students.

Reflecting on experience suggests that the use of coaching and mentoring skills in tutorials could be helpful to tutors in managing their different roles of facilitator, guide and assessor. The assessor role can sometimes be difficult to manage alongside facilitator and this tutorial model is attempting to reduce that difficulty by combining both a directive and non-directive approach. The development of a tutor/student collaborative learning environment in which both parties take active responsibility also assists with the management of a multi-role approach.

Conclusions

At a time when student employability is high on the agenda in HE in the UK and overseas, it is important as academic professionals to explore a range of skills and approaches when working with students to encourage employability. Work-based learning requires a student centred approach to learning, where the role of tutor is more of a coach/mentor. However, adopting the new approach has had early teething problems as staff and students get used to it.
A collaborative action coaching approach where both parties are taking responsibility could be effective. The authors are applying for research grants and hope to have a research study in place by the summer of 2013 (a bid is in place, the outcome will be known by May 2013). In the meantime, the tutorial model will continue to develop and be evaluated.
References


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