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CO-CREATING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS FOR UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE EVENT MANAGEMENT STUDENTS: DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND ENHANCING SOCIAL AWARENESS

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Introduction

The journey of integrating authentic assessments into the Event Management curriculum has been both enlightening and transformative for us. As educators tasked with preparing students for a dynamic and multifaceted industry, we have faced the challenge of bridging academic theory with real-world application. Reflecting on this process, we have delved into motivations and pedagogical strategies, and we have observed outcomes of developing responsible event-management professionals, enriched by a focus on community engagement, sustainability, and industry collaboration. This has been made possible through the co-creation of projects for their assessments where students are actively engaged with their own learning and reflective practice through the partnerships built between themselves, community stakeholders, and staff teaching on the modules (Bovill, 2019).

The Concept of Co-Creation in Event Management Education

Co-creation within our context refers to the collaborative process whereby students, staff, and community stakeholders work together to design, develop, and deliver live event projects. This goes beyond traditional consultation or collaboration by ensuring that all parties have an active role in shaping the outcomes. Moreover, specific elements that make this a co-creation process include the regular meetings between student groups and their charity partners, their feedback on student progress, their advice, and their involvement in their partnership as mentors in producing the events. Charity partners work alongside the student groups throughout the project, attend the events, and provide feedback. The nature of the learning reflects Kolb's (1984) model, and it is during the planning and delivery of the live events that the students learn through their experiences working within a multi-stakeholder partnership.

Pedagogical Approaches and Theoretical Frameworks

The active learning that takes place during these partnerships allows for reciprocal learning, establishing trust and interdependence. We use several pedagogical approaches within the module delivery and assessments, encompassing active (Prince & Felder, 2007), collaborative (Bovill, 2019), and experiential learning (Kolb, 2015).

Module Design

The NUS (2012) suggests that “at its roots, partnership is about investing in students with the power to co create, not just the knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself.” The modules related to here do precisely that by engaging with the communities around the institution to help with change, knowledge transfer and crucial funding for the local charitable sector. Reflecting on these desired outcomes, we can see that the students’ events have demonstrated positive impact for local community, for example, showcasing under-represented local spaces with their event delivery, and supporting campaigns to prevent their closure.

Healy, Flint & Harrington (2014) identify in their conceptual model that ‘co-learning,’ ‘co-designing,’ and ‘co-developing’ are areas in which partnerships for learning are formed. This is also supported by Moore-Cherry et al. (2016), who add that it improves student engagement in the assessment. In the case of these modules, we see improvements in their live events. These modules offer practical solutions to real-world challenges working with local partnerships.

Partnership Implementation (Undergraduate programme)

Reflecting on the live event modules with our events management studies at both Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate (PG) levels, we see how they provide similar learning opportunities, although the learning outcomes cater to different stakeholder groups. The co-creation process involves several key steps. For the UG module, staff members collaborate with local charities, inviting them to present their missions and visions to the students. This creates opportunities for students and charities to get to know each other by asking questions about their ideas/ interests and charity vision and mission. During this 'matching process,' charities showcase their goals, while students present themselves as teams eager to 'win' the chance to partner with a charity. Both charities and students then rank their top five preferences. Students must explain why they want to work with chosen charities, reflecting on their own values, interest in the charity’s mission, and their initial connection with the potential charity partner. Conversely, the charities evaluate groups based on enthusiasm, interest, and prior research of the charity. Students are informed of participating charities before the event and are advised to research them. Staff match charities with student teams based on mutual preferences.

There are occasions where a charity is not chosen by any student group. This, however, has been communicated with the charities beforehand, so they are aware that they are not guaranteed to be a chosen charity for that year’s live event module. Students can also select their own charity, provided they justify their choice. Tutors communicate with these charities to convey expectations of the collaboration, explaining that this partnership is not simply for the students to raise money for their charity. Charities are expected to mentor, build relationships, and co-create events, meeting regularly and attending the final event.

Once student groups are allocated to a charity partner, staff work closely with the matched student teams and charities, meeting regularly to develop their event. The charity or local community group acts as a mentor/client for their learning on how they plan for their live events based on key set objectives either given or set collaboratively with the student group. This links to what Clinton & Thomas (2011) identify as ‘service learning,’ recognised as a

form of work integrated learning (WIL), whereby students enhance their professional skills through participating in an organised service activity to positively impact the community.

Managing Power Dynamics

One of the challenges we encountered was managing the power dynamics between staff and students, ensuring that students feel empowered to take ownership of their projects while receiving guidance and support from staff and community partners. Addressing these challenges involves fostering an inclusive environment where all voices are heard and valued. The staff role in these modules involves managing the team, holding regular meetings to discuss project updates, reviewing minutes from additional meetings, and checking team responsibilities and activities weekly to ensure balanced commitment to the project. Nonetheless, this process of active learning whereby students are active participants in their learning experience (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), and indeed ‘partners’ within the live event project, ultimately leads to more profound outcomes for students’ knowledge and skills development. Group projects often face challenges due to varying levels of commitment among members. We enforce strict engagement rules and require groups to document their activities using project management tools, reviewed weekly. We address inconsistencies in meetings, and occasionally, students may lose group marks or be assigned alternative work if their attendance is poor. We rarely use this alternative assessment and only when deemed necessary.

Postgraduate Module Design and Implementation

The PG design for the live event project spans both semesters and two modules, aiming to accommodate PG students who often lack foundational event management knowledge, as this programme is offered as a conversion route. This mode of delivery across two modules allows students to grasp the required concepts and knowledge needed to manage the live event project. For the first module, students develop an event concept and engage with community stakeholders to consult and collaborate on their event ideas. This collaborative process ensures that students and stakeholders co-create the event, incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

For the second module, students apply professional practice to refine their event design and operational considerations, preparing them to deliver their event in the local community. The live event delivery and post-event reflection form the basis of their module assessment. Throughout this process, students work closely with community partners, receiving feedback and guidance that help shape the event’s development. This co-creation approach not only enhances students’ learning experiences but also ensures that the events are relevant and impactful for the community (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).

Project Impacts on Students and Community

On reflection, we have found that through integrating authentic assessments into the event management curriculum, the emphasis on industry engagement is one of the most compelling aspects. The active role that the students play in shaping and enhancing their learning experiences through these modules highlights the fundamental principles identified by

Trowler (2010). By involving local charities, businesses, and other stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle, we have successfully bridged the gap between academic learning and professional practice. In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, the symbiotic relationship between academic theory and real-world application has proven crucial, especially within business education and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities. This approach allows us to integrate subject and professional knowledge, skills, and behaviours seamlessly whilst providing an authentic, inclusive, and reciprocal opportunity for students. During this approach, students are empowered and challenged, learn to take responsibility, and find trust in their teamwork and be part of a community of practice with peers, staff, and external stakeholders (HEA, 2014).

WIL activities within a Higher Education Business School setting offers students a unique opportunity to develop and enhance a diverse set of employability skills. These skills extend beyond academic knowledge and are essential for success in the professional world (Ruskin & Bilous, 2020). Students collaborate directly with local stakeholders—businesses, community organisations, and charities—to conceptualise, plan, and execute live events. This mirrors real-world industry practices, with stakeholders shaping project objectives and outcomes. Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) identify in their conceptual model that ‘co-learning,’ ‘co-designing,’ and ‘co-developing’ are areas in which partnerships for learning are formed. For instance, during the postgraduate programme, students engage with community representatives to identify key needs, ensuring that the events are impactful and relevant to their target audiences. How the student groups interpret this information is evidenced in the active engagement and output.

Industry Collaborations and Outcomes

Industry professionals play a critical role as mentors and evaluators in the learning process. Charities and business partners provide real-time feedback on event proposals, operational plans, and execution strategies, offering students insights into professional expectations and standards. This engagement helps students refine their projects while building professional networks, a key factor in enhancing employability. Moreover, the co-creation of assessments with industry stakeholders ensures that the learning outcomes remain aligned with current industry trends. For example, the inclusion of hybrid and virtual event delivery methods during the pandemic was informed by industry practice and supported by external partners. This collaboration ensures that assessments are not only authentic but also forward-thinking, preparing students for the rapidly evolving landscape of the event industry. The integration of technology into event planning and delivery has been another area of collaboration. Industry input has guided the procurement and use of tools like live streaming kits, ensuring that students are equipped with cutting-edge resources. This collaborative approach enables students to simulate industry challenges and develop innovative solutions in a controlled learning environment.

The outcomes of our curriculum design to incorporate live event projects have been profound and multifaceted. For students, the practical experiences have fostered essential graduate attributes, including problem-solving, self-motivation, and resilience. The process of organising and delivering live events has deepened their understanding of stakeholder relations and community engagement, equipping them with the tools to succeed in a competitive and socially conscious industry. This can be evidenced with testimonials such as

this: “Without the Event Live unit, I don’t think I would have had the confidence in my marketing abilities to start offering freelance marketing services to small businesses.” For the university, the curriculum has fostered cross-institutional collaboration and deepened connections with local communities. A working group now consults on the university’s community work and social impact initiatives, reflecting the curriculum’s ripple effects beyond the classroom. Moreover, the financial gains and awareness-raising outcomes have been substantial, with over £200,000 generated for local charities since the initiative’s inception.

For industry partners, this engagement has strengthened ties with the university and showcased the potential of academia-industry collaboration. Stakeholders have benefited from innovative ideas, enhanced visibility, and tangible outcomes like increased community engagement and financial support. This was evidenced in feedback from community groups that the students worked with, such as: “I just wanted to say a huge thank you for an incredible event on Sunday. Have had amazing feedback from everyone that was there. Well, done on raising those funds and getting people signed up on the mailing list!”

Future Directions and Opportunities

Overall, this initiative underscores the transformative potential of co-creation in higher education. However, the process also highlights challenges, including the need for sustained stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and the management of team dynamics. As we move forward, deepening industry collaboration and exploring interdisciplinary partnerships will be key to enhancing the curriculum’s relevance and impact. Future initiatives could include developing micro-credential opportunities with industry partners, offering students certifications in areas like digital event management or sustainability. Strengthening alumni networks to act as mentors and collaborators can also create a feedback loop that enriches the curriculum.

Closing remarks

Reflecting on this journey, we feel a profound sense of purpose and responsibility. Authentic assessments, co-created with industry engagement, have proven to be more than a teaching tool—they are a bridge between education and the professional world, empowering students to create meaningful impact. Education, at its best, inspires individuals to envision and build a better future while helping to fulfil the university’s ambitions to meet the UN SDGs 3, 4, and 11 (United Nations, 2023). Our students are provided with diverse employability skills, including cultural and emotional intelligence, while collaboratively working, navigating, and leveraging the strengths of team members to fulfil their client brief. They get to see their hard work come to fruition in the delivery of their live event and are rewarded with pride from the results provided to the charities and organisations they have worked with, alongside fulfilling their academic objectives in passing the modules. They have reported on how much they enjoy the assessments, working as part of a team and the autonomy given to them to learn whilst practically applying skills learnt. These are reflected in student feedback received on completion of the live event modules, for example: “I am so grateful to the Event Management team at Manchester Metropolitan University for getting me career ready before I even knew this is what I wanted to do going forward. I would not have been able to do it without the knowledge and skills I gained during my Event Live project.” Another student

shared: “This module not only tested but also enhanced my skills in event management, from collaborating with charities, artists, and communities to curating a diverse and inclusive programme.”

Nonetheless, implementing such assessments poses challenges for HEIs, such as building strategic stakeholder relationships, securing sufficient budget for resource allocation (staff and event finance), and relying on tutor experience for effective management of student expectations and team performances. However, the benefits of co-creating WIL opportunities for event management students outweighs the challenges and develops professional skills for the students, enhancing their career prospects within the events industry. Most importantly, this learning experience cannot be authentically replicated within a traditional classroom setting alone, thus highlighting the value and impact of this practice within our curriculum.

There are challenges with the type of partnerships offered within the modules discussed here. Ultimately, the tutor will be responsible for assessing the live event and allocating marks. Students will receive feedback constantly throughout the process from their tutors and their client and they will make the decision to act upon that feedback, or not, in their event delivery. The mark awarded therefore is allocated based on that delivery. They also then receive feedback from attendees, tutors, client and other stakeholders to reflect on the success of the event and their own learning. This, therefore, does not change the power relationship in this partnership to one of equality, but it does allow for autonomy and accountability for the students learning in these modules.

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