

Introduction

Background

The course journey for discussion is the Professional Development (PD) programme that sits within the Business Masters programme offered by the Graduate School of Management at the University of Auckland.

The objectives of the PD course centre around the development of the student within a personal and professional context and the four modules of the course are taught, over a year-long period, alongside the academic subjects the students are taking. It is, perhaps, best described as a 'soft skills' or 'communication skills' course that hopes to equip the students with the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for successful and continuing employment as a graduate. To the best of our knowledge, a course of this nature is not offered at any other institution within New Zealand nor, possibly elsewhere, and, therefore, is a unique offering. According to our own research and feedback from employers, it is also a much-appreciated course as employers are constantly citing the need for graduates to have 'communication skills' alongside discipline-specific knowledge.

However, as well conceived as the course is, it was in need of some development itself as, back in 2016 according to consistent student (and teacher) feedback it was falling short of delivering its intended learning outcomes. At that point, it was seen as a skills course that was being delivered as an academic course and, in being so, was failing to develop the practical communication skills that it was intended to develop.

The course, as it was delivered had sound and well-researched underpinnings and, had mostly relevant and targeted material in connection to the Learning Outcomes (LOs). It delivered a reasonably cohesive suite of papers and material that increased in complexity to enable the student to develop their awareness and skill-base from exploring 'self' to influencing organisations. However, the evaluations from students and various observations from the faculty strongly suggested that improvements could and, possibly, should be made as a matter of urgency. These immediate concerns were based around the areas of delivery mode, relevance of material, relevance of assessment and application to 'real-world' skills. Given this, there was an obvious need for a review and probable re-development of modules concerned into more of a 'one curriculum' model which described a 'journey' and which had an obvious and practical link to graduate employability skills rather than an academic focus.

In this session the two main lecturers for the four PD courses will discuss the journey and explore the path. The main topic of discussion will be the process and redesign of the courses to meet student and programme needs. The target audience will be participants that are exploring a major redesign in curriculum and seek ideas for process with implementation strategy. The intended outcome is to share the successes and failures of the course development with participants. We feel sharing this practice will benefit others that are embarking on a similar journey and are keen to hear ideas along with challenges.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The interactive session includes at least one or two research-informed activities that teaching staff can experience as students and reflect on as academics (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sharing collective wisdom in each session allowed the opportunity for a thorough interrogation of teaching techniques before application in teaching sessions (Bocala, 2015). In the redevelopment of the course a main theme is the e-portfolio for students and integration of that tool. Bird (2007) used narrative construction to influence concepts of ourselves in story form. This session is influenced by narrative and sense-making theory in relation to the e-portfolio integration into the courses. Students draw on narrative construction to create their e-portfolio and historical experiences to look forward to their career path. Self-authorship, reflection and meaning making all attribute to the creation of the e-portfolio and the unique aspects (Buyarski et al., 2015). We build our discussion session by calling on similar literature to display the journey, process and reflection of redesigning the courses. The teaching and learning contribution of this session will be in the process along with positive and negative experiences. Others can learn from our mistakes and take away key steps to effectively redesign their own courses. The discussion topic around the redesign of the entire programme is translatable and generalisable across other disciplines and universities in order to offer participants maximum benefit.

General Discussion Overview

The Redevelopment

One of the immediate challenges was to be able to offer a skills-based course to large groups of around 65 students; scale and efficiency being problematic. The temptation, therefore, is to deliver a lecture-type lesson, a talking head that imparts knowledge and theories and which follows up with essays or written summaries as assessment tools: this approach scales and is efficient, for the teacher. However, this prevailing model was not working for the students or the learning outcomes and the feedback told us so!

The discussion proposed will focus on how we, the PD team, redesigned the programme to represent a student journey into 'Self'. We will show how, over 18 months to date, we have re-developed the frequency of delivery, assessment strategies and large-group activities to align more strongly with delivery of a skills-based course at scale. We will also cover innovations such as the inclusion from day one of an e-portfolio that the student creates and builds upon throughout their journey within the programme. We will see how this is used to showcase to potential employers, personal student attributes, skills and achievements. In addition, we will focus on how we have changed assessment from written essays to interactive skills-based events that draw on the actual skills discussed in the classroom and how the students 'live' the course content as opposed to just reporting on it.

The participants at the discussion session will be able to take away real, practical and tested ideas that have academic underpinnings and which are scale-able while retaining a sense of personal development for the student. They will also hear about the changes we made that did not 'work', as these are just as informative! Overall learnings from the process will be shared to give participants an idea of the entire journey and challenges.

The diagram (1) below is designed to give an overview of the journey our students now take and will allow for a better understanding of the content each module covers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

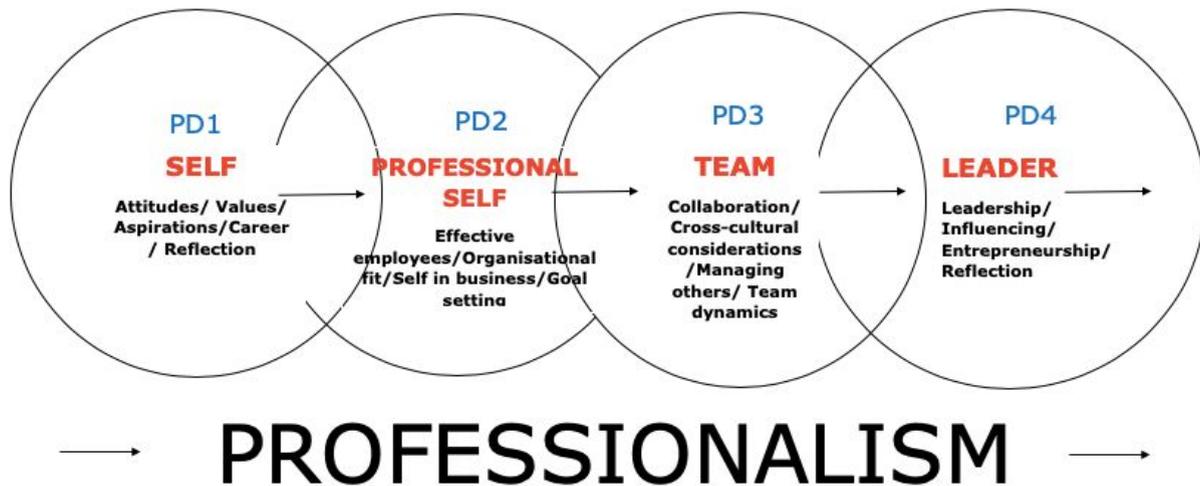


Diagram 1

Within the journey as outlined in diagram 1, the student goes from an exploration of self as a person (many students have never been asked or thought about this aspect of development) to self as a professional, within a team and, finally, as a leader and influencer. They are asked to reflect upon their journey at stages within this process and, accordingly, to make, re-make or adjust personal development goals as appropriate. We have tied this to industry requirements in order to replicate, as closely as possible, employer expectations regarding self-awareness, goals and reflection. In addition, students are asked to peer review and make suggestions for improvements to team dynamics and, in the discussion, we will explore how this is achieved and also look at our work in cross-cultural business environments – an area that is a constant challenge in our and, I am sure, other institutions and workplaces globally. This exploration will give session participants an overview of the process and provide key points that can be generalised to any programme. The session will be interactive with the presenters sharing insights and experience.

This redesign discussion adds to the conference theme conversations around large group teaching in the areas of:

- Managing *experiential learning* in large groups
- Designing effective and engaging *assessments*
- Providing meaningful and developmental *feedback* to students
- Managing *behaviour* in large groups compared to small
- Identifying, integrating, or abandoning, *technological supports* to aid large group teaching
- Creating meaningful *industry and research engaged* teaching in large groups

There will also be a clear connection to learning strategies and innovations while taking into account critically assessing learning outcomes in the redesign.

Session Description

As part of our discussion we will demonstrate activities such as how to establish and show an entrepreneurial mindset, how to build an appreciation of other cultures, how to work as a team and 'climb a mountain' and mechanisms by which students can reflect upon their and others' endeavours. We envisage taking participants through actual activities, showing them examples of what we consider to be successes and also looking at ideas that were not so successful. We envisage a very practical session where ideas will be presented, discussed and, in some cases, trialled. We will also discuss the results of our changes to the programme both from the student and teacher perspective and evaluate, with the help of the participants, how we can improve for the future and continue evolving. The development of this programme is on-going based on the nature of the industry research and connection, therefore the redesign will continue. We will discuss fatigue when it comes to constant course refresh and closing the feedback loop.

It is hoped that the discussion will be thought-provoking, fun and practically useful. We hope to shed light on an area of teaching that is challenging to all those involved in teaching skills-based courses to large groups as well as those who would benefit from practical teaching ideas that work at scale.

References

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