

An Australian Case Study: Working Students and the Decision-Making Process in Real-Life Learning

Dr Robert Gill

Public Relations, Communication Group, Swinburne University of Technology, Melba Rd,
Lilydale, VIC 3140, Australia
Email: rgill@swin.edu.au

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Abstract

This study is seeking to gain an enhanced understanding of influences that work is having on full-time students in relation to their ability to problem solve at a higher order using abstract theory, as opposed to relying on concrete experience. The majority of Australian tertiary students works while studying full-time to supplement their finances, but is this coming at a cost to their academic achievement? The case study presented reviews the results of third-year students who completed an events management unit that included real-life learning experiences. Actual learning for the students involved planning and conducting an event.

Keywords: Real-life Learning, Events Management, Authentic Outcomes

Introduction

In this paper, the author puts forward the view that many students are not cognitively prepared for real-life learning, when it involves authentic physical, legal and financial risk associated with managing an actual event. Under such authentic circumstances, students need to take on some of the responsibility for managing such risks, as there are real consequences involved with the risks materializing. This paper draws on observations and makes reference to a case study involving final-year university students conducting a triathlon as the practical section of their study in the events management unit.

Information for this paper is drawn from observations made and feedback received in relation to an Events Management unit, and from academic literature in relation to the theme. This case study is the first of a longitudinal study researching developments in the unit.

The author's initial hypothesis was the lack of prior knowledge was impeding decision-making, but now believes decision-making by the students for the unit is more strongly guided by their current and past employment experiences, rather than the theories and strategies presented in the unit content. Key observations regarding student behavior that have contributed to this belief include: time-poor students not completing tasks external to tutorial times; tunnel-focus on individual tasks and not looking at the management of the event as a

whole; fractional understanding of hurdle tasks for overall planning; and, limited leadership within teams and for the group as a whole.

Employment during tertiary studies appears to be of ever-increasing importance for students, as they battle higher education fees and increasing costs of living. The students' current employment is emerging as a strong influence on their available time, their experiences, their responsibilities, and therefore their decision-making process. It is the author's belief that as individual students take on higher-level tasks at work their view of the world becomes more specialized and ultimately influences their evolving culture and interpretations (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders & Archee, 2008). This specialization is suppressing the students' abilities to think more expansively outside their concrete experiences. Current employment for students and limited professional maturity are restricting students' cognitive range and their ability to complete learning outcomes associated with managing an actual event. This especially relates to event management tasks that might fall outside of the normal processes they engage with through their current employment; typically at a general staff or team management level.

This paper concludes that many students are not ready to take on the managerial responsibilities associated with real-life event planning, involving significant risks and definitive outcomes, without the protection of considerable guidance and safety structures provided by their lecturers and university. The safety structures include coaching and scaffolding needed for learning through authentic tasks (Herrington, 2006).

Defining Real-Life Learning

For the purposes of this paper, real-life learning refers to learning taking place in an actual or authentic professional situation (i.e. the triathlon event); often referred to as experience in the real world. Other real-life learning definitions can refer to the acquisition of useful skills that have everyday or employment-related application, or using technology and case studies from real business operations; known as experience of the real world (Tatnall, 2006; Briffett, 2001). The simple formula followed in this unit to provide authentic action learning conditions included: programmed learning (text, lectures and tutorials), student questions, team action and reflection (Boddy, 1981). The discussion that takes place in the teams must lead to action that addresses the issues and risks identified. In other words, devise solutions to possible problems associated with managing the specified event (Briffett, 2001).

Many students in this events management cohort were in employment for more than 15 hours per week. Their reasoning was aligned with concrete association, rather than abstract associations encouraged through university studies, resulting in many solutions connected with managing an event being based on their own experiences as opposed to associated theories and philosophies. According to Murray (2000), such a cognitive process is not uncommon to tertiary students. This cohort had previously encountered problem-based learning through scenarios and case studies in other units during the course of their study. Problem-based learning is a popular approach to analyzing authentic scenarios and applying disciplinary theory (Cerbin, 2000). However, critics of problem-based learning identify the approach as too abstract for concrete-thinking undergraduates who have yet to grasp basic theory (Murray, 2000). These students encountered abstract dimensions of genuine risks and challenges associated within the environment of managing an actual event.

This unit intended to move students in to a higher order of thinking through authentic achievement (Newman & Archbald, 1992). Problem-solving without 'real' consequences does not involve the same risks that authentic action learning involves and may result in students not mastering the higher order of abstract cognition. More meaningful learning takes place when students are placed in a physical and social context within which the learning will be used, especially when real physical, legal and reputation risks are potential consequences of the action environment (Herrington, 2006). The authentic tasks associated with managing and delivering an event are often ill-defined, and require students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to carry-out the activity (Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, 2002). Authentic action requires learners to take on the responsibility of identifying unique tasks and sub-tasks (Lebow & Wager, 1994). It was anticipated students undertaking this unit would utilize the relationship between theories of learning and authenticity resulting in authentic achievement involving constructive learning, disciplined inquiry, and higher order thinking and problem solving (Cumming & Maxwell, 1997).

Constructivist theorists can provide some insight into why students may struggle with expansive interpretation needed to realize authentic achievement. Constructivist theory is based on individuals generating meaning and knowledge from past experience. Knowledge from new experiences is accommodated and assimilated into existing frameworks aligned with the individual's internal representation of the world. Each individual representation is equally valid (Dalgarno 2001; Bruner 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). The cohort was dominated by students under the age of 23 years, whose experiences in the professional world were limited by their opportunities and professional status, thus restricting the level and diversity of concrete experiences to draw upon.

This aligns closely with the principle theory of Andragogy, which recognizes that adults' reasons for learning are different from young people (Knowles, 1984). Andragogy considers the social context of the learner and allows for a balance of responsibilities, understands the motivation of purpose from an adult perspective, and the importance of integration of new information with previous experience and current knowledge (Green, 1998). Many of the responsibilities associated with managing an event require a sophisticated understanding of potential problems, a sophistication that is acquired over years of experience in the discipline (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999).

Study and Work

A common phenomenon in Australian universities is students working part-time to assist the financial burden of full-time study. More than 81 per cent of tertiary students have at least one part-time job during semester according to a New Zealand study by Manthei and Gilmore (2009). In the case of this cohort, an informal survey of the third-year students indicated the vast majority worked more than 15 hours a week (it should be noted that eight students were completing their degree and were considered to be working full-time). Hours spent at work over the week are on average double the amount of hours spent in class (Manthei & Gilmore, 2009). Around 50 per cent of students believe that their employment had a detrimental effect on their academic work (Manthei & Gilmore, 2009). However, modest levels of work can enhance student performance through improved organizational skills.

A trend for Australian university undergraduates, as with many other countries, is to spend less time on-campus and more time in employed work (McInnes, 2001; Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi, 2009)). This is changing their whole perception of the university experience as employment competes directly with their studies, resulting in the students having less time to access teaching and learning resources (McInnes, 2001). The students' employment is having a growing influence on their concrete experiences. Such experiences influence problem-solving cognition, as opposed to students drawing from the theory and resources located within the university (McInnes, 2001). Experiences at work are escalating the students' cognitive processes, which are dominated by concrete knowledge.

Background

The Event

The event conducted was a triathlon in the local area surrounding the campus, and involved a board paddle on the lake, a cycle and a run. The event was open to all employees and students of the University, as this allowed the current insurance policies to cover entrants.

Each year a new event is developed for the unit. The idea being that the students develop and manage the event for the first year and the local community or council can continue to manage the event in the future. The interest in this initial triathlon event is yet to develop enough for it to become an annual event.

Student responsibilities were to develop a concept (initiated by staff and the local community) into an event over a 12 week period. Students were required to: obtain legal permissions, certificates and contracts; promote and market to the appropriate audience; obtain sponsorship and financial support; formulate appropriate policies; manage staffing and service providers; budget; maintain documents and records; manage occupational health and safety and risks; and, manage event logistics. An event evaluation was completed by students as part of their overall assessment for the unit.

Generic skills for the unit include: teamwork, identify issues, provide collaborative solutions, professional communication, individual responsibilities and roles. Student learning outcomes involved successful completion by: identifying scope and scale of events; explaining events as economic catalysts; demonstrating multi-faceted functions of event management; and, recognizing impacts of events.

The Students

The unit is part of the Bachelor of Communication and Bachelor of Tourism majors. The unit is also open as an elective to undergraduate students studying majors or minors in Public Relations (PR), Media, Marketing, Tourism, Human Resources, and Business Management.

The inaugural Events Management 2009 cohort consisted of an eclectic mix of 52 final year undergraduate students, with the majority completing PR, Tourism or Business majors. There were two mature age students (over 30 years old) and two foreign exchange students from Scandinavia. There were no overseas full-fee paying students. One of the mature age students withdrew from the course after two weeks. As the students came from a variety of majors, many did not share a similar timetable.

The Faculty

The Faculty draws students from an outer metropolitan region of a major Australian city. The vast majority of students supplement their income through part-time employment, with a high percentage of students working more than 15 hours per week. Even though the services provided by the University are very adequate, student time on campus is limited due to travel and work commitments, somewhat limiting the cohort's opportunity to do extended group work on campus.

Hypothesis

The sample group (Events Management cohort) placed a discriminating value on their current employment, which influenced their ability to generalize through cognitive thought. This was due to drawing predominantly on their own concrete experiences in order to solve problems for the management of the event, as opposed to using unit teachings.

Methods of Research

A recorded diary of observations by the unit convenor regarding all 51 students' progress throughout the unit was kept, with a view to making comparison over the longitudinal study. Records were kept regarding student interactions, progress against the event plan, and discourse between students via the online discussion forum along with stand-out comments made by students throughout the course of the unit. Ethics clearance limits the amount of information that can be directly disclosed through this paper.

The second source of information came from focus groups conducted eight weeks after the completion of the unit. All unit students were invited to attend one of three lunchtime sessions for open discussion on the unit facilitated by a researcher independent from the teaching staff. Attendance at these sessions was poor, (eight in total) due in part to many students having rounded out their degree at the completion of the previous semester. However, valuable comment was gathered in the unit feedback, much of which mirrored observations in the diary.

The third valuable piece of information was the post-event evaluation, which formed part of the student evaluation. This online evaluation completed by 21 students enabled them to express opinions through an online environment. Only the teaching staff was privy to this discussion. It also enabled the convenor to ascertain whether individual students had an understanding of the identified benchmarks and intended outcomes for the event.

Analyzing the student results provided useful information on the strengths and areas in need of more concerted attention regarding student abilities.

Findings

Observations Regarding Learning Outcomes

The following observations were recorded regarding the cohort and their performance over the semester with regard to the targeted learning outcomes. These observations do not take into account their academic results relating to theory associated with the lectures and tutorial work. These diary observations are matched against convenor notes and recorded interactions between students.

Table 1:
Learning Outcomes

Learning outcome	Rated*	Associated observations
Teamwork	Cohesion - poor Leadership - poor Communication between team members - fair Communication between teams - poor Collaborative conduct - fair	Most teams lacked a standout leader. Many teams only met during tutorial times. Online discussion was often brief and unnecessary.
Planning	Structure - fair Sticking to timeframe - poor Prioritizing - poor	Prioritizing lacked logic. Difficulty in identifying hurdles to implementing plans.
Mitigation of risk	Identification - fair Assessing risk - poor Implementing structure to mitigate - fair	Problem solving problematic, difficulty seeing other views. Lack of experience in such an event restricted risk identification.
Operational delivery	Organizing - poor Balance of duties - poor Sticking to task - good	A sense of overall team was lacking in bringing the event together, including the lead-up and close-down.
Responsibility	Accepting responsibilities - good Carrying out responsibilities - fair	Students responded well to allocated responsibility, but lacked initiative on what constituted task completion.
Professional relationships	Within teams - fair Internal - poor External - good	Networking with external businesses was impressive resulting in some excellent discounts and sponsorship. Ongoing management of relationships was lacking.
Integrated marketing	Consistency of message - poor Publicity - fair	Confusion over what was the event brand, with teams tending to pursue their interpretation of characteristics outside the brand frame.
Documentation and records x 2 (for each tutorial group)	Professional layout - excellent/poor Reliability of information - fair/fair Consistent delivery - good/poor	Some of the administration work was very professionally presented, while some team members did not fulfill the role responsibilities.

*Ratings: poor- unacceptable level, fair – suitable, good – expected, excellent – above expectations

Teams' Performance

Each student nominated to work within a particular team in order to bring the overall plan together and deliver the event. Individuals were encouraged to contribute ideas and comments to discussion relating to all teams. Even though tutorials were conducted under a general meeting environment, each team role was made the focus of a tutorial. The following table relates to assessment of teams and the online evaluation completed by all students.

Table Two:

Evaluation of Team Performance

Team	Duties and rating*	Associated observations
Administration x 2 (for each tutorial group)	Meeting agenda – good/poor Meeting minutes – good/poor Planning matrix update – poor/poor	For some of the administration team, little importance was placed on documenting and organizing tutorials in a meeting format (as per the role description).
Marketing and sponsorship	Market event to University - poor Market festival to University - fair Gain sponsorship - excellent	Sponsorship from students' current workplaces was overwhelming. The brand of the event was not marketed well enough to create a participation interest within the campus.
Promotion and media	Promote event and festival - poor Promote event through media - poor Gain media coverage of the event – poor Use of social media - good	The use of social media was an innovative and student driven – but did not target a specific audience. Not prepared to devote time and resources to a successful promotion.
Legal	Insurances - fair Legal forms - fair Permissions - good Legal documentation - good	Legal duties, understandably, required a lot of guidance from professional staff at the University, but record keeping was thorough.
Human resources	Policies - good Human capital - poor OHS for participants, staff and spectators - fair	Some vibrant team members lead the team to produce sound policy and human capital plans.
Logistics	Event layout - good Event day plans - fair Set up - fair Pack up - poor	Lack of prior experience in the type of event made this role challenging, but logistics did not respond well to guidance. Auctioning of plans insubstantial.
Finance	Weekly balance sheets - poor Authorize expenditure - poor Manage purchase orders - fair	Not having a finance background meant students had a poor understanding regarding responsible bookkeeping.
Festival	Food and drink for spectators - excellent Other entertainment - good Presentation ceremony - fair	Fantastic support and guidance from the campus' student association aided in a successful 'sideshow' festival to the event.

*Ratings: poor- unacceptable level, fair – suitable, good – expected, excellent – above expectations

Summary of Focus Groups and Unit Feedback

As this unit was conducted for the first time, students were invited to voluntarily complete feedback sheets on the unit and attend focus groups to discuss the positives and areas for

improvement with the delivery of the unit and the event. The table below summarizes the responses into positive (+ve), negative (-ve) and comments that appear to be neutral. For some discussion points students gave no response (NR).

Table Three:

Student Feedback on the Unit

Discussion topic	% -ve or +ve comments	Key points from feedback
What was gained from completing the event	68% +ve 8% -ve 8% neutral 8% NR	Hands on experience – got to see results. Apply course material to real situations. Taking on real responsibility. Experiencing teamwork dynamics. Dealing with organizations outside of the University.
The opportunity to apply skills/knowledge learnt	62% +ve 28% -ve 10% neutral	The roles given for teams were not structured well. Working in teams is a great experience. Turning theory into practice was good. Too many people working on one event limited our ability to use our skills.
Improved ability to manage and plan future events	62% +ve 38 -ve	Working in teams was too narrow. Need more hands-on experience for all responsibilities. Using discussion board to share ideas. Contrast in process with current employment. Strong grounding in all tasks in running an event.
Aspects of the project that could be improved	88% -ve 8% +ve 4% NR	The actual event – not of interest to most of the group. Worksheets relating to lecture notes not relevant to individual teams and their event roles. Having two tutorial groups made communication difficult. Teams need to be more closely monitored by tutor. Tutorials too disorganized. Assessment not clear and marked too hard.
Internal assessment of team work	66% +ve 22% -ve 12% NR	Different degrees of contribution. Each team has a clear picture of individual contributions. Teams will just give each other good marks.

Student Assessment

The following table provides a breakdown of the cohorts' results in relation to the set assessment. Analysis of these results have aided in pinpointing those areas for which the cohort generally performed well in, and those areas in need of more definitive guidance.

Table four:

Overall Cohort Results

Assessment	Summary of results*	Observations
Individual contributions to meeting/tutorials (25% of assessment)	N-6, P-17, C-16, D-12	Direct correlation between attendance and critical participation.
Written strategic plan for team role (20% of assessment)	P-25, C-18, D-7, HD-1	Good understanding of team responsibility.
Team presentation on success and challenges to their roles (20% of assessment)	N-2, P-49	Teamwork and responsibility sadly lacking in some participants, having a broad effect on all marks.
Overall event plan (25% of assessment)	N-2, P-9, C-23, D-14, HD-3	Students 'spoon-feed' other teams roles via team presentations.
Online evaluation of event (10% of assessment)	N-2, P-7, C-7, D-15, HD-20	Assessment criteria quite simplistic, leading to high results, but personal opinion clouded some objective evaluations of the event.
Unit final results	P-3, C-19, D-26, HD-3	Online evaluations of event results have skewed final marks.

*N-fail, P-pass, C-credit, D-distinction, HD- higher distinction

Other Observations

The convenor also conducted a brief survey of the stakeholders (including sponsors, service providers and other university staff) regarding their interaction with the students. General responses displayed overall positive exchanges, but the majority of stakeholders did not receive any follow-up or report at the conclusion of the event, which was a stated task for all teams.

Some students found it difficult to separate personal views from critical analysis when evaluating the event. This clouded their interpretation of the effectiveness of the event by basing evaluation on subjective opinion rather than on the objective facts and data presented regarding the process and event objectives.

Summary of Findings (Relating To Above Tables)

What is evident from the findings is that many students failed to grasp the holistic objective of running an actual event; especially against individual team responsibilities (see tables two and three). Events have critical hurdle tasks along the planning and operation process, that if not satisfactorily completed can increase risk for an event and may block the progress of the

event actualization. Some students' inability to satisfactorily complete particular tasks resulted in the ongoing intervention by the convenor to ensure the event could progress.

There was a disconnection between the convenor and many of the students regarding understanding of the generic skills (see Background) for the unit. Some observations and feedback made reference to student opinion on the inappropriateness of the event, as opposed to focusing on the process and the learned experiences of actually conducting an event (see table three). Also, many student observations and feedback related to having to endure discourse on areas of event planning not connected to their specific team tasks (see table three). The mission for the unit was to expand students' understandings of what is involved in all areas of managing events and festivals.

Overall student results against assessment tasks did not reflect a true measurement of the students' abilities to achieve the desired learning outcomes (see tables four and one). The vast majority of learning outcomes (table one) were rated unacceptable (12 out of 26) or suitable (10 out of 26). Team performance (table two), which is a leading learning outcome for the unit, was rated at an unacceptable level (12 out of 30). Therefore, the unit did not effectively deliver its intended learning outcomes.

When analyzing student response through focus groups and unit feedback (table three), a high percentage of students (38 per cent) interpreted their experience of the unit as unsatisfactory in preparing them to effectively plan and manage events. Even though 69 per cent of all feedback had a positive element, associated remarks indicated many students were not focused on the intended outcomes, which related to measuring the success of the process as opposed to personal enjoyment in managing the event (see key points from feedback in table three).

Final unit marks (P-3, C-19, D-26, and HD-3) did not accurately reflect the students' abilities to manage the process of conducting events and festivals. Final results were skewed by marking system for the online evaluation of the event, which significantly contributed towards some students' total marks. The poor results obtained in the team presentations (table four) were representative of the teamwork required to successfully complete practical roles.

Evaluation of Findings

There are many positive contributions, apart from greater financial security, that employment can add to a student's academic life, including professional contacts and organizational skills (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005; Richardson et al., 2009). When analyzing the results, there were areas of strong performance that could be attributed to the students' employment. Exceptional results in sponsorship and external professional relationships were a direct consequence of the students' current employment. Also, one of the student teams (Administration) kept excellent records and documentation of the meeting procedures – a reflection of their clerical and organizational skills.

However, work was also impacting on students' available time. Students with heavy workloads have less time to engage with theory and apply new knowledge to problem-solving (McInnes, 2001). Student employment often involved specialized roles, usually at a lower

operational order for young part-time workers, restricting their exposure to direct roles and responsibilities. This may have contributed to the poor result in problem-solving through teamwork and for the holistic discourse on the process of running the event. Key to the success of the unit involved understanding the management process in its entirety, not just the sub-tasks. The students' specialized work commitments may not have exposed them to the business as a whole, and may have narrowed their focus on what was important (Harmer, 2009).

In relation to some students' focus on the theme of the event, as opposed to the importance of the actual process, a degree of explanation for this can be attributed to work impacting on other elements of their life, including that employment decreases time for their recreational and social life (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005). Students come to view university work as a release from their 'real' work and are looking to fulfill some of the missing social engagement through the class interaction. Being involved in an activity that doesn't sit with their ideals on social engagement may have overridden the intended academic focus, which was on the process rather than the theme of the event.

Overall, the students' final results matched well against University grading, but the analysis of student abilities against learning outcomes was unexceptional. The system of assessment for the unit appears to have failed in its task of measuring the students' ability to critically analyze at a higher order and develop core transferable skills for event management, which was key to the learning outcomes for the unit (Bennett, Dunne & Carre, 1999; Newman & Archbald, 1992).

Limitations of the Research

This case study is limited by the lack of comparisons across different cohorts for this unit, and a clearer picture of the actualities will be available at the end of the longitudinal study. This will also allow a comparison with student attitudes towards events based on different activities.

The results would be strengthened with a cross-comparison between similar case studies conducted by other institutions with analogous learning outcomes, as no demographic considerations have been applied to this case study. What is also missing from this case study is a consideration for differences between working and non-working full-time students undertaking this unit, and similar units of study.

Changes that will be made for future data collection should include: stronger record keeping and framing on unit observations, the employment roles for working students, and the incorporation of independently-facilitated focus groups into the semester period to potentially capture broader participation in feedback.

Conclusion

The research, student results and activity observations for this Events Management unit align with the hypothesis that working students who study fulltime predominantly draw on their own concrete experiences when exercising decision-making processes - as indicated by the unit failing to successfully achieve the desired learning outcomes.

An analysis of the circumstances of cohort for this unit, matched against previous research and theory relating to full-time students working part-time while studying, demonstrates that the students' paid work influences their decision-making experience and, therefore, their ability to problem-solve at a higher order. The influences of paid employment affecting student problem-solving skills relate to time constraints placed on study due to work commitments, and the nature of lower operational tasks that are typical of the responsibilities given to young part-time workers. Such students are not receiving exposure to holistic management through their employment, which is limiting their concrete experiences. These concrete experiences aid students in constructing lower-order solutions to typical issues and problems associated with event management.

Unit design needs represent the development of transferable skills within the event management discipline, rather than a measurement of students' abilities to complete and textually represent operational tasks, in order to achieve the higher order decision-making processes associated with effective event management.

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