Authentic assessment in higher education: a collaborative approach

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Abstract

This research explores a collaborative learning experience using Authentic Assessment between businesses in a European City and a Higher Education (HE) Institution. Using the umbrella of Authentic Assessment, MBA students solve a problem through Problem Based Learning (PBL) while working with businesses and City Hall. Students explore the concepts of 'best practice' in service delivery in the City.

A mixed methods research methodology was applied to gather the primary data. The aim was to examine this collaborative approach to PBL using Authentic Assessment for the students while enhancing their overall learning experience and to gather their feedback and that of participating businesses.

The outcome resulted in the development of a Service Charter for the City, through an interactive student assessment strategy. Further recommendations for training business owners on how to deliver 'best practice' for service delivery are also proposed.

Authentic Assessment through collaborative learning works and has many benefits.

Keywords: Authentic assessment; collaborative learning; problem based learning; experiential learning; city service charter.

1. Introduction and Research Context

Authentic Assessment (AA) is an engaging approach to assessment where students use and apply knowledge in real-life settings. Many consider it the best approach to assessment for reasons such as its authenticity, student engagement benefits, opportunities to work with industries, prospect of observing 'best practice' in action, and, from an educator perspective, it reduces the opportunities for contract cheating. Authentic Assessment in higher education is concerned with working in conjunction with external organisations where students at all levels are given the opportunity to explore real life and real world issues. Ultimately, the emphasis is on better ways to assess work (McArthur, 2023). The Authentic Assessment examined here is the work of an MBA cohort as they look for new ways to improve service delivery and are tasked with writing a 'Service Charter' for a City.

1.1. Background to the Study:Developing a Service Delivery Experience through AA

A collective excellence in 'service delivery' creates an experience for the consumer which is memorable, affirming, and, most importantly from the commercial perspective, it makes the consumer eager to repeat it. While each business operation has its own style, personality, and particular environment, there are certain constants in the provider-consumer interchange which will, when taken all together in a city, paint a picture of either satisfaction or dislike, contentment or discomfort, efficiency or sloppiness. Using Authentic Assessment and collaborative learning while working with businesses to improve this service experience in a City is the context here. The Collaborative learning process centred on a group of 22 MBA students while they interacted with 20 businesses in a European City to research, develop and write a Service Charter. Details of the development of the charter per se are not dealt with in this paper, just the experience of its development by the students and business alike while being authentically assessed.

Finding novel ways to assess third level students is always a challenge for Higher Education Institutions; hence the value of placement at the fulcrum of learning and business development through a collaborative learning challenge and experiential learning. An experimental approach was afforded to MBA students when they were tasked with writing a 'Service Charter', while, in parallel, being assessed through 'problem solving' for 5 ECTS credits with the third level partner. The dual aspect of learning between businesses and college began when students, using Authentic Assessment, sought to solve a problem for City businesses and present a solution, and the second, when a recommendation came from the research that the businesses needed to undertake further training in order to implement the plan of the Service Charter. Addressing inconsistencies in the service model and synchronising efforts to grow commercial activity is best addressed through cooperation in the competitive space, an approach known as 'co-opetition', coined in 1913 by the Sealshipt Oyster System in the USA (Jansen van Nieuwenhuizen, 2016) to describe the idea of

cooperative competition, or cooperating with competitors. Its principles are that in cooperating with one another you are creating more business, you are in 'coopetition' not competition, working together to common advantage (Jansen van Nieuwenhuizen, 2016). Co-opetition is a perspective on business relationships which highlights the ambivalence of competition and cooperation (Stein, 2010). The City business community at the core of this paper is now leading the way, joining together to establish a coordinated approach to the quality of service in their City. Also, for educators there is a need to move beyond the conceptualisation of education as a simple acquisition of knowledge to one which nurtures and assesses innovation and expertise in the utilisation and application of knowledge, (Boland, 2010), achieved here through Authentic Assessment.

1.2. The Taks: Develop A City Service Charter Using Authentic Assessment

A relatively new concept and not widely embraced (limited literature), the purpose of a Service Charter is to outline and detail the standards a customer/visitor/client can expect when engaging with service providers in a City. A City Service Charter is a collective commitment by all those engaged in the daily service life of the City to focus on the needs and preferences of their customers, motivated by values such as respect, integrity and excellence. Among an extensive set of aspirations, some of the following desirable ones are: 1.Commitment to cooperation by all sectors of service providers in instilling a sense of 'pride of place' and service excellence; 2.Enhancing the customer experience by being attentive to all aspects of City life; 3.Constantly monitoring and communicating; 4.Ensuring staff are trained to be thoughtful, courteous, motivated. When writing a Service Charter, it is necessary to define the purpose, scope and standards of your business's commitment to customer service so that employees and customers know what to expect (smallbusiness.chron.com).

2. Literature

This section briefly examines some of the terms in the context of the literature that were applied in this investigation; assessing in Higher Education; starting with Authentic Assessment the main assessment approach that encompasses, Problem Based, Experiential & Collaborative Learning.

2.1. Authentic Assessment, Problem Based, Experiential & Collaborative Learning

Authentic Assessment concerns students in higher level institutions deeply examining issues in a real-life setting that are relevant to their field of study (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; McArthur, 2023). This type of assessment allows the students to become immersed in the real-life problem, transferring later to the future graduate's skills that they bring to the workplace (McArthur, 2023). Problem Based Learning (PBL) an element of Authentic Assessment began in the the medical and health sciences, progressing into mainframe Higher

Education. A learner-centered approach, PBL is where students engage with a real-life problem (Savery, 2006). PBL is complex in nature and not simply a teaching technique, but a total educational strategy (Barrett, 2005). PBL is a very specific approach to education learning and it affords students space and time to define their own learning and to be creative (Barrett, 2005; Kahn & O'Rourke, 2005). Students are tasked with developing novel solutions which facilitates interactivity with businesses and each other to enhance learning (Barrett, 2005). Experiential learning also enhances student learning in higher education and (Kolb & Kolb, 2107) developed a model of learning based on the notion that the best learning is achieved though involvement, reflection, and action, placing action into the management learning model.

Looking at collaboration, Roschelle & Teasley (1995) found it to be a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem. Dillenbourg (1999) found that it is challenging to agree on what collaborative learning is and, in its broadest context, means that learning happens together. Learning can involve two or more people, groups, or communities learning together, and at all levels. Dillenbourg (1999) suggests that collaborative learning is an activity of joint problem solving, and learning is expected to occur as a side-effect of problem-solving, measured by the elicitation of new knowledge or by the improvement of problem-solving performance. The pedagogical sense is prescriptive; one asks two or more people to collaborate because it is expected that they will thereby learn efficiently. The psychological sense is descriptive: one observes what two or more people have learned, and collaboration is viewed as the mechanism which caused learning (Dillenbourg, 1999).

3. Methodology

The study explores Authentic Assessment practices and seeks to understand if there is a benefit using this assessment strategy in collaborative learning experiences using PBL. Twenty-two MBA students and 20 businesses were involved in this research as well as one member from City Hall. A mixed methods approach was applied and both sets of data were triangulated (Patton, 2012). To examine the experience of the learning of the students a positivistic research methodology was applied as quantitative facts can be directive and informative (Harvey, 1998). A quantitative survey instrument using a Likert scale was developed after the learning, and in conjunction with colleagues involved in department programme development. The questionnaire was tested to eliminate any errors and cleansed prior to execution. All 22 MBA students were asked to fill out the survey in person in a class setting to ensure 100% participation. The survey was completely confidential so that private contributions and negative experiences where they arose could be provided in confidence (Harvey, 1998). All ethical concerns were addressed including informed consent, withdrawal, data used and storage in line with GDPR. Students were given the freedom to

make genuine comments about their experiences. Comment boxes were also included to gather deeper insights and opinions which are informative. For the second element of the research, the business participants were asked in person about their experience with working with the students and their implementation of the Service Charter. A qualitative methodology was applied as it was believed that a post-positivistic approach (Patton, 2012) would gather in-depth answers from participants about their experiences. In all, 20 City centre businesses participated in the interviews. An interview guide consisting of 10 questions which focused on their overall experience, learnings, and suggestions for the future. The City Hall contact was also asked to participate in the research to add to the data. A pilot interview was conducted, and all cleansing and ethical considerations were applied. Due to the importance of this Service Charter and the future of the project, all the businesses who participated in the project completed the interview along with the City Hall; 21 participants in total gave their full consent.

4. Findings & Discussion

This section sets out some of the pertinent findings; however, the restriction of the paper limits the presentation of all findings.

4.1. AA Student Experience

Authentic Assessment, examining PBL at MBA level was found by the students to be appealing and stimulating. Of the 22 students, 87% stated that is was a positive experience. Stress was mentioned by 5% who maintained that it was a taxing experience overall. When asked about solving problems together as a group to come up with a plan, 66% stated that working in a class group was enjoyable overall. In terms of personal development, 39% stated that it improved their professional development skills, with 30% stating that the process will benefit their interpersonal and employability skills in the future due to the specific nature of the task of dealing with City businesses and City Hall.

From a negative stance, students outlined that the real-life challenge was stressful as they were tasked with delivering a working document that was to be implemented by City Hall and participating businesses. 25% of the students worried initially that they may not be able "up to the task", or, "the standard required", as the work was of the level of a "professional consultancy". "I was gravely concerned initially; what if it all 'fell flat' and was not of the standard expected by City Hall, and also, how could this impact on my overall MBA results?" Another student stated that they were "worried that they may not be able to deliver the required document in the given term time".

Other positive encouraging comments included; "I felt excitement, joy and happiness when we met the deadline and the City representatives loved our Service Charter". Another student

stated that "I cannot explain the sheer delight at seeing the final colour version of our plan in beautiful red, the colour of our City". "It was such an honour to complete this work for City Hall". The final statistic showed that the students were very satisfied with this Authentic Assessment for MBA level; 90% stated that they would love more collaborative learning with industry in the future for other modules.

4.2. Experience of the City Businesses

Findings from the City businesses were extremely positive. They enjoyed working with the students on developing the Charter. Positive comments included, "I enjoyed working with younger people to determine how they viewed our City and our service delivery". Another participant said it "was a novel experience and I learned so much more about overall service delivery". The next retailer said, "we have to be competitive as a City and this project focused our minds on how to be more competitive!". Two contributors mentioned that businesses need to work more closely together and not to dwell on competitiveness". This of course is the whole ethos behind co-opetition. "The three new principles for the City developed by the MBA students from their research of 'Service, Customer, and City Principles' are something that we can now strive to achieve as businesses and in a wider context as a City". Other participants greatly appreciated the training offered to learn how to implement the charter that the students devised. "It was exciting returning to further training". "We learned so much from it".

Some negative comments included, "the timing was bad for my business". For me, "the induction day was too long as I had to find staff cover". Timing will always be an issue for us. We are retailers always on the go", but the "summertime was definitely the wrong time due to staffing issues". City Hall stated that one of the learnings was to run the training just before the summer as many shops get temporary staff in over the summertime, so the mystery shopper audits can be affected. For the next roll out, we will run it in February. The next challenge will be to move beyond the 20 businesses that participated and to have a City-wide implementation of the new City Service Charter.

The following *Figure 1* outlines the cycle of learning from the process:
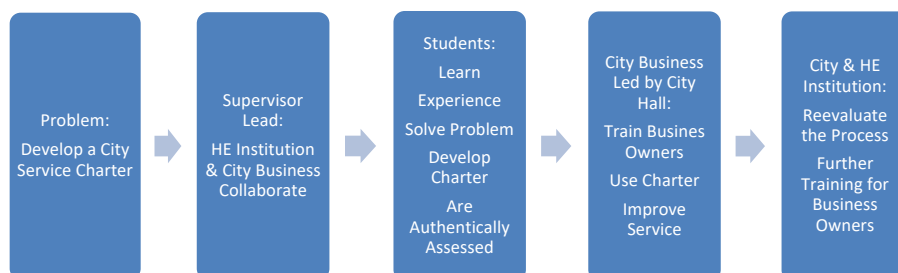
Figure 1. AA - Collaborative Educational Experiential Learning Cycle

5. Conclusion

Authentic Assessment is a challenging process for students and lecturer alike; however, to be challenged is to learn and to learn one must be challenged. Setting a real problem through AA and encouraging enquiry, is a perfect way to assess students in Higher Education settings (Biggs, 1999). The findings of this research are very positive in the context of AA using PBL and collaborative learning with a HE institution and local businesses. Theorists provide much debate around the ideas & philosophies for the use of PBL and advocates of collaborative and PBL provide compelling benefits in the literature for their use. This has been reflected in this current research. Using AA and collaborating through problem solving can provide original and exciting challenges for instructors and students. The benefits of this type of learning experience and assessment for the students especially at MBA level are all-encompassing as MBA students need and deserve to be challenged. PBL means the students can become part of a 'real life' collaborative team in an organizational setting; in this case a City scape setting. Authentic Assessment provides relevant student engagement and although it is a more challenging process for lecturers to oversee, the realities are that it helps to counteract any opportunities for contract cheating, now real concerns for Education. Overall, solving the problem, developing the charter in this case and the continuation of the learning was a very positive experience for all. The MBA students helped decipher the mindset of the City business community by conducting surveys among regular shoppers, tourists, occasional visitors and residents, and consulting broadly with many interested contributors. Students became richly engaged in the process. The end of this AA resulted in a valuable Service charter which will guide the consumer experience in the City into the future and set a precedent for similar charters throughout Europe. The operationalization of this charter continued the cycle of learning, as all the 20 service providers who signed up to the charter undertook a short training courses to facilitate its implementation. This training will be ongoing, with protagonists engaging with those who experience the City routinely. The Service Charter, guided by values such as pride of place, integrity, accountability, respect and excellence, will lead to improved service delivery, customer service and, ultimately, increased profits in a positive cooperative community, while the benefits to the HE community can be reassurance as to the reliability of this assessment approach that avoids opportunities for assessment deception by students.

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