**TMI - Too Much Information: Creating Employability Skills Resources - enabling students to develop an effective interface with a client**

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**Abstract**

*Employers from a range of disciplines have commented on the problem of weaning graduates from the behaviours instilled in them by the typical assessment process. When asked to give advice, information is usually correct but too often goes beyond what is needed by the client – thus giving the client TMI - too much information. As part of a project examining a range of employability skills a resource has been created to address this particular issue, which comprises audiovisual files illustrating four different contexts (housing, health, IT and education) with accompanying teaching notes. Students are encouraged to put themselves in the place of the client and recognise the difference between being told the ‘textbook’ response and receiving relevant advice. This paper examines the creation of the resources and evaluates the perceived value of their use in the classroom.*

1. **Introduction**

Creating Future-proof Graduates was one of nine projects selected in the first round of a new scheme in the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in 2006-2007. The scheme awarded up to £200,000 to realise a project which would have wide applicability in the higher education sector. The project was based at Birmingham City University and was led by a team comprising two National Teaching Fellows and academics with the support of a doctoral research assistant for part of the project. The project team reported progress to the HEA and to a Project Board, a body made up of employers, representatives from University faculties and University Central Services including the Students’ Union. The Board also included partners from other further and higher education institutions and other interested organisations including the Centre for Recording Achievement and one of the HEA Subject Centres and provided an objective sounding board to the project team.

Student feedback at the team’s own institution (then UCE Birmingham, 2006) led us to believe that the most effective way to encourage the development of employability skills in students was to enable them to discover and develop these skills through critical exploration within their own learning and professional contexts (Palmer, 1998; Biggs, 1999; cited in Spiller, 2005). The project produced a number of resources which we argue support deeper learning and the development of transferable skills, using a range of high and low technological solutions. These became available for use and adaptation to the full range of academic disciplines from December 2009 and are available at [www2.bcu.ac.uk](http://www.bcu.ac.uk) . This paper reviews the development of, testing and evaluation of one of the created resources which uses a set of critical incident triggers to demonstrate the relevance and significance of an issue across many disciplines and supports students to become aware of the potential for them to create a problem with future clients and to address this when the situation arises.

1. **Identification of the specific skills gap**

Yorke and Knight (2002) identified a number of constructs for employability in higher education, any of which would enable a good graduate to “stay in the race” (Brown, 2002, cited in Yorke and Knight, 2002). Throughout the *Creating Future-proof Graduates* project, the team focused on one of these constructs, by devising critical incidents embedded within the curriculum, to provide opportunities for students to develop, practice and reflect upon a varied range of ‘employability’ skills (Morton, *et al.*, 2009; Hill, *et al.*, 2009). Critical incidents have often been used in the Health Educational field (Lockyer, Gondocz and Thierge, 2005). As such incidents normally occur in the workplace, these incidents were created in partnership with employers to reflect real world scenarios. Critical incidents can prove a useful addition to teaching repertoires as they engage learners in ways other teaching approaches do not as they make possible more opportunities for students to become self aware and self developmental. The incidents act as triggers which may be used to spark exploration of issues, often by facing students with dilemmas or ethically challenging behaviours and these, supported by discussion, debate and other activities encourage the deep learning process.

Knight and colleagues (2002) suggested it was useful to focus on a few ‘employability skills’ and to “bombard” students with as many opportunities to practice as possible. Simulations have a role in providing suitable environments for such practice, especially where students are given the time and space to be reflective, as suggested by Schön (1987).

A scoping review of research into the employability skills gap was carried out by the team. The Institute of Directors (IoD) Briefing (2007) said employers found most graduates were unprepared for employment and highlighted that employability skills were perceived by employers as more important than subject specific skills. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) argued that:

“Much more effort needs to be made.....to get the message across that going to university and coming out with a 2.1…is not enough to land a graduate level job. You have to develop your skills and experience….21st century graduates need to demonstrate to employers that they can ‘hit the ground running’.”

(*Daily Mail,* 30 January 2007).

Following the scoping exercise, the project team conducted in-depth interviews with students, graduates, employers and academic staff to understand the individual perception and/or experience of ‘graduate employability’. The interviews were exploratory and aimed to elicit areas of difficulty, which, in the early stages in the workplace, were relevant to graduates’ development as professionals. Employers and graduates were questioned regarding the most important employability skills. It became obvious that there were some clear overlaps between graduates’ and employers’ views:

* literacy: writing for diverse audiences;
* personal attributes: developing assertiveness (saying “no”);
* people related skills:
* dealing with shocking situations (what to do when a theoretical model fails)
* career related: finding out what they do not want to do; understanding the profession and knowing how to go about finding information.

These findings were compared to the range of secondary sources which also identified people related communication skills, as for example, Archer and Davison (2008) who discovered employers rated this skill as the most important but which was ranked only 16th in terms of the actual abilities of new graduates to manage. Therefore one of the resources was planned to focus on this area and TMI was born.

1. **The rationale behind TMI (too much information)**

With the employer partners to the project raising the issue of developing good communication skills, it was recognised that even though the work students covered in their course provided the knowledge, there remained concerns at how this was then communicated to clients. Students often garner a great deal of information and feel that they must communicate this knowledge, ensuring that the person they are working with can understand the technicalities of their situation. However, employers suggested that the skill of selecting the right information for the right circumstances is one of the keys to effective communication.

In this scenario, using the modern ‘text speak’ acronym ‘TMI’ (too much information), the vision was a series of triggers where new graduates are providing information to a client. The information is always technically correct, but it raises a series of questions:

* Is this appropriate information to give the client at this time?
* Is it meeting the needs of the client?
* What information is appropriate to provide at a given time?
* How could a new graduate gauge what approach would best serve the client and improve communication?

Students can be quite blinkered in their attitudes to generic information, resisting seeing the appropriateness of a subject unless it has direct links to the subject of their degree. This is sometimes why multi disciplinary working can be difficult to implement, as students find it quite problematic to transfer their knowledge and experiences from one setting to another (Berryman, 1991) Yet both practitioners and academics know that many skills are transferable and that, in the workplace, subject specific information can be useful, but being able to communicate beyond disciplinary boundaries is essential. Part of our task was to support students in changing their views of the world, helping them to realise that there is more to skills than just having the explicit knowledge and rules (Brown *et al.,* 1989).

To demonstrate both the transferability of the ‘TMI’ phenomenon and the need for responses which would meet the needs of clients in as wide a range of situations as possible, it was originally envisaged that a number of scenarios would be recorded and students would be able to start by selecting the scenario closest to their own disciplinary field, then later be able to see how the situation is mirrored in other contexts. In reality, however, time and resources meant paring the scenarios down to four, but these were felt to demonstrate the wide relevance of the issue across disciplines.

1. **Creating the resources**

According to Beetham (1997) the “imaginative use of ICT can engage more learners in the excitement of learning”. Given that the project team had already used video clips to develop some of the other critical incidents within the overall project and animation had been used to develop another, it was envisaged that in this case the scenarios could be devised as a series of photo ‘strip cartoons’ (still images with both speech bubbles and recorded voice-overs) to maximise accessibility and demonstrating an alternative medium for presenting materials.

Initially finding colleagues to create appropriate scenarios was difficult and using a network of personal contacts and asking people face to face was found to be essential. It was planned to create a range of scenarios applicable across social sciences, education, health, technical and business studies, giving wide multidisciplinary coverage and transferability of use. Four have been completed, with the fourth scenario (visiting a web designer to try to improve the marketing for a small business) not having been tested as it was the last to be developed, although interest has now been shown in using this scenario in the design disciplines. Testing the created resources and linked teaching sessions to evaluate their efficacy and establish sustainability remains necessary even though the project has officially ended.

Creating the TMI resource began with the premise that students learn best when they have fun (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998). To link the scenarios one actress became the client, creating a humorous counterpoint to the serious message conveyed by the resources, as the client moves from interface to interface, encountering our new graduates in a variety of settings, experiencing their desire to communicate what they knew about the situation, but taking little account of her needs.

The four scenarios have the client:

* visiting a housing office when her home is under threat because of her husband’s redundancy;
* visiting her teenaged son’s school for a parents’ evening;
* attending a hospital appointment for a barium enema, and
* visiting a web designer to discuss a site for a new business venture.

In each case, the information supplied by the new graduate in their professional role as housing officer, teacher, radiographer and web designer is factually correct and thoroughly explained, but the use of jargon and the need of the new graduate to get over their share of the information take precedence over the needs of the client. Following each interaction, there is a short clip recorded with the client, establishing how she felt about the encounter and what her needs had actually been.

The project team were keen to engage students in the creation of the resources and employed students to act, photograph and record the first scenario, the visit to the housing office. The ‘client’ was a professional actress who was a former student of the University. However, by chance the ‘Housing Officer’ role was awarded to an actual housing student who would later be part of the class which would be involved in ‘testing’ the materials, a fact which was not realised at the time of casting, but which later created a difficulty for running the exercise in that class.

There were also issues with the variable quality of audio-visual material. The voice-overs for the housing office (recorded in a classroom) were of rather poor quality so later recordings were made in studios with professionals. Additionally, the results of the photography were initially disappointing, but much improved for the second (radiography) scenario, shot in a dark suite where the images worked better and were useable. The photographs for the Parents’ Evening and Web Designer’s office scenarios were shot and later edited by professionals.

Another debate was how to link the audio and photography to create the envisioned look of the resources. Initially it was anticipated that a software package called ‘Captivate’ would be used to create the scenarios, as this has a range of features which would have been appropriate, but for a team with limited experience, restricted time and the need to create very professional looking materials for use in a wide range of institutions, this became a daunting task. Creating a mock up of one short client interview took over one hour, particularly timing the audio clips to fit the images and speech bubbles. Consequently, there was a need to enlist another professional to edit and put together the final resources for the scenarios.

Some compromises over the materials had to be made. For example, the speech bubble concept was lost in the final audio visual clips, because it would have be too time consuming (and expensive) at the final stage of editing. As a compromise, which has worked effectively, a PDF booklet with all four scenarios was produced which used the photo strip cartoon concept and speech bubbles to highlight elements of the scripts linked to the images. This fitted neatly into the DVD case in the compendium which brought together resources form all areas of the wider project. It was also made available on the website as a downloadable pdf file.

Just having four scenarios does not minimise the transferability of the resource, but may limit how many others want to use it, given what has been said (Berryman, 1991) about the sometimes blinkered approach of students (and some staff). Having said all this, once the concept was available to demonstrate, it has become relatively simple to create new subject specific scenarios as scripts which could be acted by students in their classrooms or by staff using something as simple as PowerPoint animations, with or without audio accompaniments.

Guidance on how to use the materials and suggested exercises and how to prepare students for activities such as listening skills and role plays have been produced following the evaluation of the material used in a series of classrooms during the testing of the created resources.

1. **Using and testing the materials**

Classroom interaction prompted by the trigger clips has included discussions about the way the new graduate focused the attention on the information they knew, what might have been more appropriate and, working in groups, students have rewritten and role played the scenarios in what they saw as a more appropriate ways, providing reasoning for their choices. Adult motivation and learning are enhanced if the learning context and materials are authentic and relevant to the student’s needs especially if knowledge can be immediately applied (Caffarella, 2002, cited in Winning, et al., 2004).

It was also be possible to help students step into the client’s shoes by showing the scenarios from outside their own discipline, where they would be recipients of the information, as if they were clients rather than imagining themselves as the professional. Therefore, as suggested by Brown, *et al.* (1989) the way this resource was used could support teachers in helping change students’ views of their world and their roles.

The resources have been tested at Birmingham City University with postgraduate and undergraduate housing students in the School of Social Sciences, with trainee teachers in the School of Secondary and Post-compulsory Education and with Radiography students. The evaluation process continues as others from outside the University have begun to use the resources and the resource has been embedded within new classes and continues to receive positive reactions with students. For example, out of 87 respondents attending presentations about the project as a whole 55% said they were likely to use or adapt TMI and feedback indicated that participants found the resources “easy to adopt to suit individual institutions needs” and that it was “great to know I can make the resource context specific”.

**5.1 Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with trainee teachers**

A trainee teacher group were the first to test the materials. The session comprised a set of activities, starting with a discussion on parents’ and teachers’ expectations, followed by watching the TMI scenario, then using the transcript to revise the content and ending with a role play session. Table 1 below shows the means for the ratings (from 1 “not very useful” – 4 “very useful”) that students gave to each of the activities that were conducted in the session. According to the medians the two most useful activities were the TMI scenario (DVD) and the role play.

**Table 1. Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session – Trainee Teachers**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | a. discussion | b. discussion | c. DVD | d. transcript | e. role play |
| **Median** | **3** | **3** | **4** | **3** | **4** |

The comments below show the explanations of the ratings. In eight of the comments given by the students, the opportunity to practice in the role play was perceived as a very useful activity and emphasised. Two students also commented on the DVD and that it was useful to have an illustration of a poor meeting. Overall, the session as a whole was praised by the group.

**Explicit comments given by individual student participants – Trainee Teachers**

|  |
| --- |
| * the role play was a very effective method to consolidate my learning from the session |
| * allowed me to discuss potentially difficult scenarios in a safe environment |
| * useful to think about communicating to parents and practice it |
| * the role play enabled me to think more specifically about what I would say |
| * it was extremely useful how not to conduct such a meeting ….. then struggle our way through conducting a hypothetical meeting |
| * very useful insight and practice into parents' evening and the process needed to be successful |
|  |

In terms of considering the appropriateness of activities to accompany the DVD, it was suggested that role play was a very useful activity. However, it is possible that this was due to the context since the group evaluating the resource consisted of graduates in drama and related disciplines training to teach drama in schools.

Notwithstanding the group’s familiarity with role play as a vehicle for learning and their evident appreciation of the opportunities it afforded for individuals to “practice in a safe environment”, the discussion surrounding the DVD and the evaluation of the role play exercise also provided useful insights into the trainee teachers’ understanding of the wider issues. For example, exploring the notion of teachers and parents having separate agendas for their meetings illustrates the need to “make the tacit explicit” (Russell and Loughran., 2007). Similarly, testing the materials also allowed the group to recognise the danger they faced in subconsciously believing that, because information existed, it was required by the client. Whilst this lies at the very heart of the TMI project, the actual danger is that, in the case of the parents’ evening scenario, the information that is ultimately “too much” has been generated by the teacher as a result of sustained hard work. The sub-text of the conversation was that the client should acknowledge this fact.

**5.3 Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with housing students**

Initial trials in Housing also indicated that the role play would be an appropriate way to plan ways to communicate with a client. The results of the evaluations for this resource were different in that the group of students were mostly part time students on day release courses, normally working in the field already and therefore more experienced than the undergraduates in the other disciplines. However, the full time students within the Housing group felt it was a useful experience, highlighting an issue they hadn’t considered before.

The student group started the session with a discussion of their approaches to clients and communication, followed by watching the DVD. In this case students viewed both the subject specific scenario, but were then asked to ‘put themselves in the client’s shoes by watching one of the other scenarios. Following discussions about the impact of being a client, they worked in pairs to create their own role plays of a more appropriate set of responses, some of which were demonstrated to the rest of the class.

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**Table 2** **Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session - Housing**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1. group discussion | 1. DVD on Housing | 1. DVD Hospital | 1. working with scripts | 1. role play |
| **Median** | **4** | **3** | **3** | **3** | **3** |

The students shared their experiences from work. The majority of the students in this group were mature and exhibited having some familiarity and experience with the issue presented to them. The group was mixed in the levels of experience of the workplace. The DVD presenting a simulation of a housing crisis was presented and discussed. Also, to illustrate the client perspective, the group was shown a patient and radiographer situation at the hospital. This was a parallel scenario but in a different context for the students to experience and understand the client’s perspective. Following discussions about the impact of being a client, the students were given the original housing scripts and worked in pairs to create their own role plays of a more appropriate set of responses, some of which were demonstrated to the rest of the class.

Table 2 above indicated that the discussion with peers, especially that between part time, experienced students and those without experience was the most useful activity in the session. The remaining activities were perceived as useful to set the scene and raise awareness that communications need to be tailored to suit the needs of clients.

**Explicit comments given by individual student participants - Housing**

The students’ comments on the session referred to this being useful as a whole. Students particularly highlighted the benefits of exploring and reflecting on assumptions and clients’ reactions.

* ......very useful I saw different ways of dealing with people
* Good session, provided insight into how housing professionals can approach situation making assumptions
* I feel that my confidence, skills and knowledge have been increased by studying theory and has widened my repertoire on which I can draw and apply in the workplace
  1. **Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with radiography students**

It must be considered that in other subjects tutors might use the resource in a different way as preferences for how to run a session may differ. The radiography trial did not use role play, but as with the other trials engaged students in discussions (in pairs) after watching the DVD, embedded within a classroom session and examined the positives and negatives of good communication with patients.

Students rated the aspects of the session as follows:

**Table 3** **Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session - Radiography**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1. DVD | 1. discussions in Pairs | 1. negatives and positives |
| **Median** | **3** | **3** | **3** |

Many of the students in this group had been on clinical placements in radiography departments, but indicated that they still had quite limited experience of talking to patients. They were much more focused on the procedure itself than on communicating with the patient, so this session brought the patient and their needs into focus.

**Explicit comments given by individual student participants - Radiography**

* The DVD assisted in showing how not to communicate with patients and the effects
* More emphasis on exactly what to say, and ask the patient
* ...being a radiographer isn’t just reading guidelines and understanding them or not just discussing your experience but to put all that in practise...
* Learning from others, discussing experiences and the theory and guidelines are all important.
* ..-what to say and what not to say was useful.

**5.5 Developing confidence in dealing with clients**

In addition to evaluating the value of the various components of the teaching sessions, students were asked about their confidence in dealing with clients before and after the sessions. Their responses were analysed to establish whether the students perceived the sessions, previous experience or other sources as crucial in their level of perceived confidence. It was interesting that for all three cohorts, confidence boosting was not necessarily the most valuable element of the way the sessions were run.

**5.5.1 TMI Education (Parents’ Evening)**

On both occasions, before and after, the students related their confidence in dealing with a particular issue (parents) to their own experience, or lack of experience in schools. One student commented that they had “observed and attended a parents' meeting”

However, after the session, some were able to identify specific areas to improve on despite the absence of experience in schools, for example one student, as shown below, identified specific areas to focus on: “not enough experience of assessment and parent interaction to feel prepared to discuss progress with parents”

**5.5.2 TMI Housing**

In the case of the housing group, the reasons for there being no perceivable change in their confidence in dealing with customers, both before and after, were based on the students’ previous experience in their workplace: “I have good knowledge of homelessness, excellent interviewing skills and I always prepare myself prior to an interview”

Another commented that “having experience of working in housing helps put everything into perspective that you learn in the classroom” and another suggested that “if you understand why you do the things you do and the way it affects the customers you can do your job better”

However, students did value being able to discuss their working practices with their fellow students as they felt it “can help you evaluate your own working practices and share what works for you”, therefore engaging students in reflective practices.

**5.5.3 TMI Radiography**

The students showing the least confidence had not yet been on placement and this group showed the biggest increase in confidence following the teaching session. Those showing high levels of initial confidence had been on clinical placements and observed and been active in preparing patients. However, here some of the students indicated that their confidence had decreased slightly after the session. Students commented, for example, that this was because, in their experience, if the department was busy, good communication with patients might suffer, suggesting “radiologists tend to quickly get on with the examination” rather than spending time with the patient. Another commented that they had expected the administrators would have gone through the procedure with the patient, rather than seeing it as part of their role.

They did feel that it was important to have “help from the radiographers on how to prepare patients” and the session helped raise awareness that “patients might be anxious”.

1. **Conclusions**

The TMI problem is a multi disciplinary issue and employers have reported that it is one we could address with students before they enter the workplace and start dealing with clients. The resources created through the project provided useful triggers for other activities.

From a training perspective, the TMI materials also provided a very valuable opportunity to assess the students in their journey towards meeting professional competencies. Some of these competencies refer to directly related skills, such as a professional’s ability to communicate appropriately with a range of stakeholders. Other competencies relate to less tangible, yet equally important, aspects of professionalism such as the demonstration of appropriate values and attitudes. It is clear that the use of these materials can contribute significantly to our students’ knowledge and understanding and, in terms of meta-cognition, to their ability to reflect on their own professional development.

In summary, these findings demonstrate that this resource, when embedded into a contextualised teaching session dealing with wider issues of communication, has a value in supporting the development of the transferable skill of selecting the information which is appropriate to the needs of the client needing the advice of our new graduates early in their careers.

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