The Creative Dynamic:
Innovative solutions to teaching transferable skills in the classroom
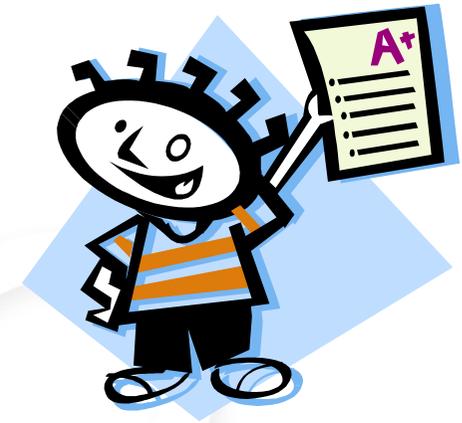
INTED 2009 Conference
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The Higher Education Academy
National Teaching Fellowship Scheme

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Outline of the session

- **Some definitions - graduates as professional practitioners**

- **The 'Creating Future-proof Graduates' Project at Birmingham City University**
  - Identifying 'missing' skills
  - Resource creation
  - Mixed methodology and transferability

- **Reflection upon our processes**
  - Pitfalls and successes encountered
  - Recommendations for future projects - identifying 'the creative dynamic'

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Employability and the classroom

- **Yorke (2004) suggested that one method of developing employability was through the experience of Higher Education, in gaining a set of skills, understandings, and personal attributes**

- **These enable a good graduate to "stay in the race"**

  Brown, 2002, p9, cited in Yorke, 2004

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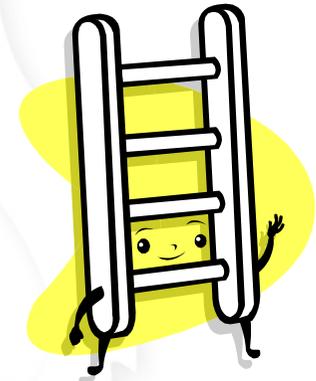
Delivering 'transformative' learning

- **Transformative learning happens as adult learners make sense of their experiences**

   Mezirow, 1991; Harvey and Knight,1996, cited in Corder et al., 1999

- **Need to create learning environments which challenge ideas and instinctive approaches to catalyse critical thinking and reflection**

- **Contemporary work environments require employees who can think creatively, reflect on and solve problems, and work effectively within teams**

   Chapman et al., 2005

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Embedding employability into the curriculum

- **National agenda on employability skills with a particular focus on their integration in the curriculum**

- **Need to respond to a new, more diverse generation of students in an increasingly complex, competitive and uncertain working environment**

- **Alongside this there is scope for new learning and teaching methodologies and resources**

- **Our approach has been to create critical incidents as 'triggers' to learning**

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The 'Creating Future-proof Graduates' Project at Birmingham City University

- **£200,000 funding through the Higher Education Academy's *National Teaching Fellowship Project* scheme**

- **We set out to encourage reflection on a set of targeted employability skills identified by our employer partners**

- **A set of classroom activities have been developed based on work place scenarios**

http://www.bcu.ac.uk/futureproof
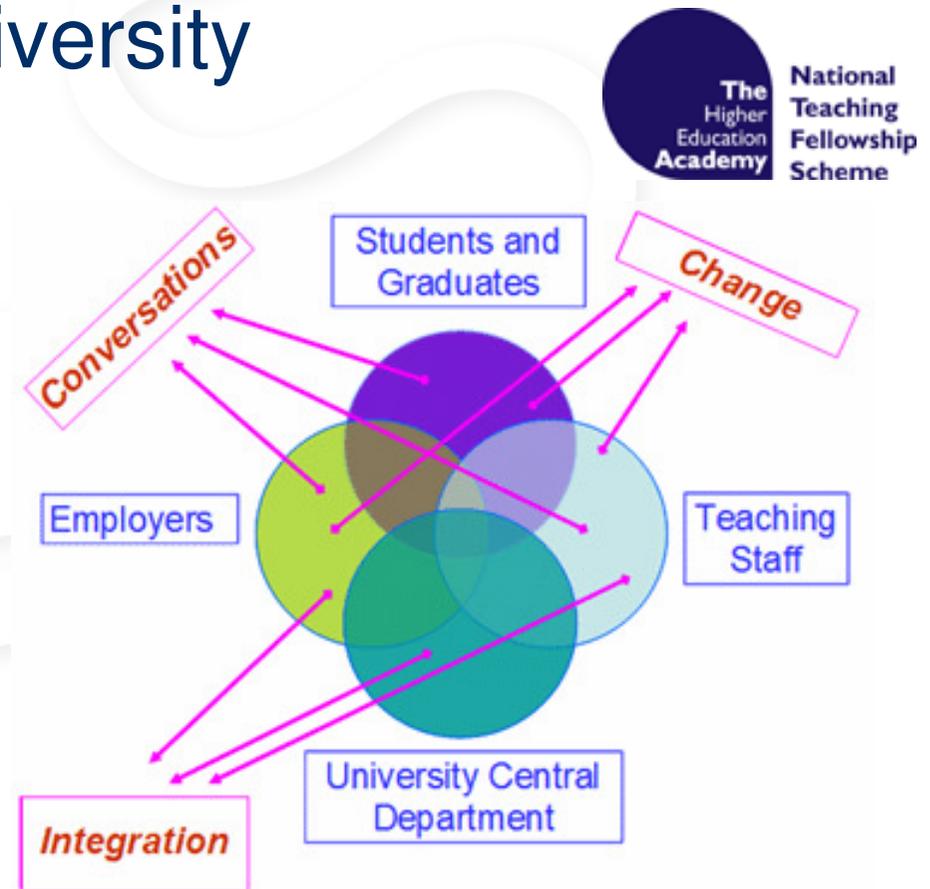
Project Objectives

- **Linking the classroom with professional practice**

- **Bridging the gap between teaching and learning and professional demands**
  - To produce a suite of simulated critical incident case studies to enhance students employability skills
  - To involve employers, students and HE staff in the production of the case studies
  - To evaluate the effectiveness of these critical incidents in enhancing skills for employment across a range of disciplines / sectors
  - To produce an evaluation toolkit

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The critical incidents

- **We are developing resources to address eight skills areas identified either through research or interviews with our partners**
- **Here we focus on two in particular which consider how new graduates handle a sensitive situation in the workplace :**

  - 'Managing an ethical dilemma' (exploring appropriate conduct and communication in a professional context)

  - 'TMI' (too much information), (exploring an exchange in which the focus ought to be on the needs of the client/customer rather than the knowledge and professional shorthand (jargon) of the graduate)

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Incident 1: The Ethical Dilemma

- **The student watches a video in which a recent graduate overhears someone sharing commercially sensitive information**
- **Additional 'talking heads' videos offer conflicting advice on how to respond**
- **Uncertainty over the best course of action prompts debate and reflection upon professional & ethical behaviour**

Reflecting upon resource production:

Ethical Dilemmas scenario

- Characters descriptions were developed and auditions held with our own School of Acting
- Produced by a script-writer and crew who were current or former students and filmed over three days in summer 2008, adapting University buildings to serve as a generic office environment
- The actors were generally excellent, although one struggled with the lines on the day and had to be recast
- Some technical issues were encountered with variable audio-visual quality but refilming was difficult because many of the actors had completed their studies!
- Initial footage of the scenario was completed on schedule, but post-production has been delayed by problems with the format of the recording, resulting in expensive professional assistance
- Pilot material has already been used in teaching

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Incident 2: TMI

- **A photostory with audio shows a new graduate providing information to a client in a variety of professional roles & contexts**
- **The information is always technically correct but complex and jargon-heavy, raising a series of questions:**
  - Is this appropriate information to give the client at this time?
  - Is it meeting the needs of the client?
  - How could a new graduate gauge what approach would be best?

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Reflecting upon resource production:

TMI scenario

- Scripts were developed by colleagues from various departments across the University, in order to demonstrate the transferability of this idea across disciplines

- Finding colleagues to create scenarios was initially difficult and a network of personal contacts was essential; one planned case has not been possible because no suitable teaching opportunity was available, but others have now made very positive contributions

- Initially variable audio-visual quality led us to make later recordings in studios with professionals.

- Professional help was also necessary to edit the final resources, and additional expenditure on this meant that some compromises had to be made to the original plans

- The revised set of resources is now nearing completion

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Reflecting upon resource production:

TMI scenario

- **Initial evaluation of use in the classroom has begun**
- **Quantitative testing is in progress, but early feedback is positive, including the following student comments:**
  - "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"
  - "it was extremely useful [to see] how not to conduct such a meeting"
  - "very useful insight and practice"
  - "enabled me to understand what is important and relevant and what is not"

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Concluding comments

- **In seeking to produce 'authentic and relevant' resources (Caffarella, 2002, cited in Winning et al, 2004), we hope our experiences will be of use both for the development of similar materials, but also in running other large projects**
  - The learning curve was substantial and two years proved very short for the creation and testing of materials
  - Difficulties with student roles in production and editing could have been lessened with better initial guidance from the project team

- **But teamwork and good practice has enabled creative solutions**
  - Building a network of supporters has provided momentum and enthusiasm – the 'creative dynamic' – to drive the project forwards
  - Innovation in the use of employer partners directed our research and resource production
  - Embedding a robust and rigorous testing and evaluation process will ensure a sound evidence base

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Recommendations for future projects

Initial design and costing

- Create a common vision between project team members with clearly delineated roles.

- **Work with employer partners whenever possible. Such links provide valuable insights into what we can do to prepare our students to compete for graduate level jobs in challenging markets.**

- Carefully assess and cost in technical provision from the outset. Be realistic about what each contributor can bring to the table in terms of time, technical expertise, experiences, etc.

- **Use your networks and ask for co-operation face to face. There is no real substitute for personal contact with those you wish to support you in your research into educational practice.**

- Be realistic about how much time is required to achieve the anticipated deliverables.

- **Plan timescales with great care and add contingencies in terms of time as well as budgets.**

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Recommendations for future projects/2

Ongoing management and evaluation

- Keep in mind the agreed outputs for all stakeholders.
- **Ensure any student input is carefully managed, with clear and explicit guidelines and expectations, and regular progress review sessions.**
- Build in time for reflection and, if necessary, be willing to adapt your initial ideas to suit revised timelines and other constraints.
- **Ensure co-ordination of work to maintain time and budget provisions.**
- Implement a longitudinal, action research testing and evaluation regime with staff, students and employer partners to provide the evidence base underlying the principles.
- **Ensure appropriate ethical oversight, following University guidelines and procedures for good research practice.**

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