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Learning from visiting speakers: the case of events management

James Musgrave, Rhodri Thomas and Bridget Kusyj

Introduction

Visiting speakers are used regularly by module leaders on vocational courses to enhance the student experience. Many of those involved would argue that inviting leading practitioners into the classroom potentially adds value to university provision by being interesting, informative and relevant in terms of prospective careers. There is anecdotal evidence, however, that practice varies and that students do not always gain as much educationally from the engagement of visiting speakers as they might.

This paper reports the findings of a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) project that explored current practice and the perceived impact of such practice on students following one set of vocational programmes: events management. These programmes are worthy of investigation because they contain distinctly applied elements as well as the higher order academic skills associated with any undergraduate study. The project started with a systematic review of existing literature on the use of guest speakers as an aid to teaching and learning in higher education. The paucity of material available made this a disappointing and somewhat frustrating exercise. Data for the project were gathered via a survey of staff at the UK Centre for Events Management, interviews with 18 module tutors who were the most frequent users of guest speakers, and two focus groups with students from all undergraduate levels. Ultimately, the purpose of the project was to find ways of enhancing the learning associated with the use of visiting speakers.

Existing research

There is little robust theoretical or empirical research available that deals directly with the use of guest speakers. Limited insights are available, nevertheless, from literatures that explore employer engagement and practice-based learning.

Guidance from commentators varies. Some dismiss industry guest speakers as little more than entertainment (Kemp and Foster, 1995; Payne, Sumter and Sun, 2003) whereas most are positive (see for example Metrejean et al, 2002; Garraway, 2006). Particularly valuable contributions are made by Karns (2006) and, especially, Ormrod (2004). They note the importance of making connections between

learning outcomes and the contribution of guest speakers, and that careful planning is required, which includes encouraging and enabling guest speakers to relate theory to practice. How such connections are made may vary; there is little sense from the (limited) literature that there is a 'best' way of connecting theory to practice via guest speakers.

Visiting speakers: staff perspectives

The discussion that follows draws on the survey of academic staff and subsequent interviews with most frequent users of guest speakers. The intention here is to provide a flavour of the findings rather than a complete review; a more extensive review will be published elsewhere.

Though intensity of usage varied, 22 of the 27 full-time members of staff who participated in this project used guest speakers at some point during most academic years. The rationale for usage varied but for most tutors the purpose was evidently to add credibility and currency to their courses and to make connections between industry and the University.

The selection of visiting speakers was invariably informal, based largely on individual networks or information available in the media. This informality is exemplified by the selection process. Tutors generally had a sense of the kind of people they required as visiting speakers rather than a systematic process that matched the skills and knowledge available with the requirements of a particular module. Few tutors, if any, knew the qualifications of industry speakers or considered this a matter of importance.

For most tutors, successful guest speaker sessions were those where the students were 'active learners' (engaging with visitors) rather than just listening to lectures. In these cases, the visitors tended to participate in more than one session and responded to input from the students (such as a presentation or short piece of reflective work). This offered students the additional potential benefits of being able to network or get to know employers with a view to future employment.

Tutors felt they faced several logistical challenges when trying to organise activities involving visiting speakers but that these were outweighed by the advantages of the speaker.

The extensive briefing of speakers that is advocated by some commentators (Ormrod, 2004) was not common practice. Briefing of students prior to events was also limited. The majority of tutors provided advance notice of speakers but there was little sense of systematic preparation for and review of sessions. In some cases this is explained by the aim of the session (for some at Level 1 it was simply to introduce a new sector), and in others there was an expectation that students should, as part of the learning process, grapple with the relationships between theory and practice.

Evaluation of speakers is best characterised as informal and tended to consist of conversations with students the following week. Emphasis was put on what one tutor called the “wow factor and the buzz” after the event. Another tutor incorporated material discussed by the speaker into a ‘test quiz’ but because this was not a formal part of the course not all students completed it. Two others claimed to use feedback sheets. This study found little evidence of formal evaluation of the impact of speakers on learning, though the desirability of doing so (and the associated methodological challenges) was recognised by several tutors.

Visiting speakers: student perspectives

The focus groups with students explored four issues: the features of a good guest speaker; potential benefits and limitations of using guest speakers; preparation; and reflection.

There was a degree of unanimity about the qualities of a good visiting speaker. These were that they could speak about their personal experiences and employment; that they could relate their experiences to theory; that the material being presented was relevant to the course; that they avoided too many facts and figures perceived as not relevant; that they used visual aids; and that they were enthusiastic and able to stimulate student participation and questions.

Students welcomed the idea of visiting speakers and readily identified the potential value of being exposed to practitioners. Levels of satisfaction with guest speakers, however, varied. Level 3 students were distinctly more enthusiastic about the value speakers added to their learning yet were also,

perhaps somewhat paradoxically, often also more critical that their expectations had not been fully met. The broad consensus among the Level 1 students was that the volume of speakers inevitably resulted in mixed ‘performances’. Nevertheless, there was a general perception that learning occurred but that, often, this was because goals were little more than ‘introductory’.

Most students did not appear to invest time in preparing for sessions led by visiting speakers and sometimes even seemed unaware that such sessions were taking place until they arrived at classes. Even those who did prepare generally limited their efforts to elementary data-gathering about the speakers or the company that they represented. Though several sensed that such an approach was limited (and even unsatisfactory), there was a common uncertainty about how they might better prepare.

For some, notably Level 3 students, there was sometimes a degree of frustration that visiting speakers did not know the relevant theories being studied and could not, therefore, incorporate comments on them into their presentations or answer questions about them. To some extent, such critical perspectives are perhaps indicative of greater reflection (or an ability to articulate their reflection) among final-year students. Such an interpretation is reasonable but should not be exaggerated. It would be misleading to suppose that reflection by students on the contribution of visiting speakers to their learning was extensive or happened automatically. There is little doubt that students felt they learned most when evaluation and reflection was structured by the tutor.

Concluding comments

In this paper, it has been possible to provide only a glimpse of the insights from the project on the use and value of visiting speakers. Additional analysis of the data has been undertaken and will be reported at greater length elsewhere. Nevertheless, from the foregoing it is possible to offer observations on current practice and recommendations for improvement.

It is clear that students generally welcome visiting speakers, though promotion ensures greater attendance. Inevitably the quality of speakers and

the student experience varies. Generally, however, it seems that students learn from their engagement, with Level 3 students articulating more sophisticated positive outcomes.

Analysis of the data suggests that student learning might be enhanced if the degree of informality that typifies current practice is, to an extent, formalised. Formalisation in this case suggests paying more attention to the following:

- Agreeing learning outcomes with guest speakers and ensuring that they understand where their session fits with the broader aims of the module
- Preparing students for the session so that they are able, where appropriate, to relate relevant research evidence (the theoretical or empirical material considered during other parts of the module) to what visiting speakers present
- Encouraging reflection, perhaps by introducing activities that encourage students to make connections between what the visitor has discussed and other parts of the course.

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