

CASE STUDY

Student partnership in creating an event: Benefits, challenges, and outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores a partnership within an events management topic. Students were encouraged to take ownership over the creation and operation of an event held on the university campus. The topic lecturer provided guidance throughout the process and liaised with the students to define the assessment and the marking rubric for the event project. Research data was captured through two surveys—one during the event project and one after the event project was completed. The surveys captured quantitative and qualitative data about students' perceptions on the benefits, challenges, and outcomes of this experiential learning experience. Survey findings indicated that communication and teamwork were key aspects that needed to be managed to effectively collaborate on the project. Classroom discussion and online communication tools were used to share ideas and information, and work towards the common goals of the event. Through this project, students developed their relationships with their peers and university staff and felt that they had a valuable learning experience that helped to connect theory with practice.

KEYWORDS

event management, authentic assessment, outcomes, students as partners

Discussions around student engagement and experience occur frequently at higher education (HE) institutions, prompting questions of how to engage students and how to encourage active learning. Bunce et al. (2017) noted that students that considered themselves as “consumers” of HE often had a more passive approach to their learning. Shifting away from a consumerist perspective with hierarchical relationships, HE institutions are placing more emphasis on creating an equitable experience that is aligned with the social constructivist perspective (Monico & Kupertadze, 2020). Moving beyond simply gaining student feedback, the students-as-partners (SaP) approach sees students as “co-producers” in the learning environment of HE (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). Partnership can be defined as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, 6–7). Partnerships in HE can take on many forms, from learning design to

collaborating on research projects, and are believed to foster transformative learning (Healey et al., 2014). No matter the type of project, Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) state that there are key values that drive the success of the SaP approach: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility. These values are critical for creating genuine co-creation and partnership between students and staff.

Another prevalent theme in pedagogical literature is the focus on active engagement rather than passive knowledge distribution (Kolb, 1984). Literature on student experience emphasises the importance of experiential learning as a means of encouraging greater student engagement (Ehiyazaryan & Barraclough, 2009). As such, this events project was designed to provide an active, authentic assessment experience as well as giving students a sense of agency and empowerment over their learning in the topic.

CONTEXT: THE EVENT PROJECT

The event

As part of their topic assessment, students were asked to plan and operate an event. The experiential learning gained through this project was viewed as a more authentic option for assessment and was designed to encourage greater engagement and learning.

Authentic assessment has been defined as “an assessment requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life” (Gulikers et al., 2004, 69). Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner (2004) developed a five-dimensional framework of authentic assessments consisting of (a) an assessment task, (b) physical context, (c) social construct, (d) assessment result or form, and (e) assessment criteria. This framework states that the assessment task should resemble the types of activities that are carried out in the professional environment (Gulikers et al., 2004). In relation to this case study, the development and operation of this event simulates an event project that would be created in the real world. Whilst the students were still on the university campus, they were required to plan and interact with one another in a manner that resembled the professional environment (Gulikers et al., 2004). Students were given ownership of the task (Savery & Duffy, 1995), and the event brief was created to align with their knowledge and experience. This project also encouraged students to work collaboratively with others and, in doing so, students needed to take responsibility for their learning, both individually and as a team (Monico & Kupatadze, 2020). Collaboration such as this has been considered a characteristic of authenticity (Herrington & Herrington, 1998).

Authentic assessments have been perceived as risky and challenging to implement as they require deep disciplinary knowledge as well as the monitoring and guiding of learners (Villarroel et al., 2018). However, studies have indicated the positive effect of authentic assessment on quality and depth of learning (Dochy & McDowell, 1997; Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014). Scouller and Prosser (1994) found that students are likely to adopt transformational learning practices when presented with a particularly interesting or intricate assessment task.

Each week the students were exposed to relevant design and management theory, which they implemented in the planning of their real-life event. In this SaP project, the lecturer acted as a consultant for the event project and guided the students.

HOW STUDENTS WERE ENGAGED AS PARTNERS

At the beginning of the semester, the students were tasked with pitching ideas for the event in small groups of four to five students. After the event pitches, the whole group voted on the activities to be included in the event and assumed the role of “co-producers” (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). During this initial discussion, students identified their areas of interest and were involved in determining their role in the event. For example, a few students self-elected to organise the marketing of the event, others were responsible for planning specific activities in the event program, and a couple were responsible for the risk and inclusivity planning. Discussion of roles and responsibilities in class ensured that all students were consulted and involved in the process. Throughout the rest of the semester, an hour of the class time was devoted to roundtable discussions enabling students to communicate with one another and progress with their tasks. This is especially important in events management because many tasks intersect (Bowdin et al., 2011). For instance, the marketing team needed detailed information from those organising the activities to advertise the correct details.

The students were also involved in discussions around the assessment criteria and the components that were included in the marking rubric. These discussions gave students a clearer idea of the expectations of the project and made the marking process more transparent. As stated by Donnison and Penn-Edwards (2012), higher education students want to see clear links between learning and assessment, with a particular focus on measurable outcomes. Additionally, this co-creation of the marking rubric encourages students to feel like equal participants in the learning community (Peters, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Event students worked together during Semester 1 (March–June) of 2021 to create an event targeted towards first-year students. As second-year students, the group of 20 students had experienced the transition to university and were able to design activities that would assist new students, both academically and socially.

As a relatively new area of research, SaP studies have traditionally relied on a qualitative case study approach (Matthews et al., 2017). In contrast to this approach, Matthews et al. (2017) captured quantitative data on the perceived importance of SaP activities of Bachelor of Science students. In this SaP project, a similar quantitative approach was implemented by using the survey method, with two surveys administered to students. The survey approach was chosen due to the anonymity that it provided. This was particularly important since the researcher was also their lecturer and wanted students to participate voluntarily and share their honest opinions (Jennings, 2010). As the research was conducted with human participants, ethics approval was sought and gained from the university human research ethics committee.

The first survey was developed based on suggestions from Sambell, Brown, and Graham (2017) to capture student feedback during a SaP project. This survey was conducted midway through the event project, allowing students to voice their opinions on the SaP approach so far and enabling them to make suggestions for improvement. Students were asked to respond to open questions about the benefits and challenges of the project as well as to a quantitative question to indicate how they felt about the class event project, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 indicating dissatisfaction, 3 as a neutral point, and 5 indicating satisfaction).

The second survey was conducted after the event project was completed and included questions that were developed based on the SaP and authentic assessment literature (Sambell et al., 2017; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014). The second survey was conducted after the event, with 14 of the 20 students completing this survey. This survey captured both quantitative and qualitative data on the project experience. Both surveys were administered anonymously through Qualtrics. Quantitative data was imported into SPSS to explore frequency and mean scores for scale items. The open questions were thematically analysed by the researcher to examine the key themes. With a small class size of 20 students, the first survey achieved a response rate of 80% and the second survey had a response rate of 70%.

REFLECTIONS

Mid-way survey

The initial survey was designed to provide students with an opportunity to comment on the event project so far. In terms of satisfaction with the project at that time, the mean score was 4.31 (on a 5-point Likert scale), and, to explore their experience further, students were asked to identify benefits of the project, challenges, and suggestions for improving the project.

Perceived benefits focused on practical experience, collaboration, and communication. Half of the respondents commented on the project as a key opportunity to gain practical events experience and to reinforce the theory. Compared with their previous events topics, the students participated in the event process from the conceptualization of the event through to the hosting and operation of the event. Therefore, they were able to experience all the event phases and form a deeper understanding of the process, time, and resources required to plan and run an event.

Collaboration and communication were often discussed together, as students viewed this as an opportunity to work together to discuss and reflect on ideas. This is positive, as these are key skills for working in the events industry (Junek et al., 2009). Whilst these factors were acknowledged as benefits of the project, working with others and communication were also identified as challenges. Most students had previous experience of groupwork in higher education and were aware that reliance on others and lack of communication can be issues (Gravett et al., 2020). A larger-scale project like this can be complex as it involves a wider range of stakeholders (i.e., university support services, students and staff from a diverse range of disciplines), so students expressed their concern about waiting for others to complete their tasks before they could move on with their own. Additionally, a few of the students expressed feelings of uncertainty in terms of their roles and how they needed to work with others.

The last survey question asked for suggestions to improve the project. These suggestions included clarification of roles, continued communication, and showing empathy and understanding when working with others. In response to the survey, some class time was dedicated to group communication to help alleviate the challenges. Students were able to inform each other of event updates and progression. Creating these connections in class assisted students to feel more comfortable working with other students outside of class time. The students were from a range of degrees, so this collaborative project helped to break down barriers and establish a communal space for the class (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018). Furthermore, a shared group on Microsoft Teams allowed all team members to

upload information and communicate with one another. This also allowed the lecturer to share information outside of the weekly class time.

Post-event survey

On the post-event survey, when asked how students felt about planning and operating a real-life event on a 5-point Likert scale, the mean score was 4.17. When asked to respond to the statement “I am proud of the event that we planned and operated,” the mean score was 4.43, demonstrating a high level of satisfaction with the event project.

To gain an understanding of the students’ sense of agency and purpose (Lizzio, 2006) in the project, they were asked to indicate how important their role was in completing the project. All students felt that their contribution was important, with 35.71% responding that their role was extremely important and 28.57% saying that their role was very important. This demonstrates that students felt that they had a key role; however, the roles were not all the same. The differing roles were a challenge that was mentioned by a couple of respondents in the qualitative comments, suggesting that some roles were bigger than others.

This study also aimed to capture data on the outcomes of the event project. It is proposed that collaborative projects can assist the sense of belonging and connection (Healey et al., 2014), so items measuring sense of connectedness were included in the survey to capture students’ perceptions, and this was based on statements developed by Lizzio (2006). Table 1 illustrates overall agreement with the statements, with the highest ratings in relation to collaborating with the lecturer and fellow students. The relationship to the wider university setting was not as strongly indicated, illustrating a slightly stronger sense of connectedness within the topic compared to the broader university setting.

Table 1. Sense of connectedness

STATEMENT	MEAN (STANDARD DEVIATION)
I enjoyed working collaboratively with my fellow students	4.64 (SD=0.48)
I enjoyed working collaboratively with my lecturer	4.71 (SD=0.45)
I felt like a valuable member of the project team	4.07 (SD=1.16)
I have a sense of togetherness with my peers	4.50 (SD=0.5)
I feel connected to staff and students in the university	4.00 (SD=0.85)

The last quantitative question asked the sample to respond to the following statement: “the project encouraged my participation on the topic.” This resulted in a mean score of 4.57, which is reflective of the high attendance and engagement in class that was observed during the semester.

Success factors and challenges

Qualitative data captured the student perceptions in more detail. Analysis of the comments found some similar themes to the midway survey, with a particular focus on teamwork and communication, but also recognized the relationships within the class and positive work environment.

Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2018) commented on the importance of getting to know one another, especially to establish a shared space wherein students feel comfortable in providing suggestions. This sense of cohesion was evident in the students' responses, with one participant stating:

It's given everyone a chance to actually get to know one another. Normally you're just in a small group, talking to 2–3 of your peers. With this task, I feel as though I've actually had a chance to make connection with my peers as a whole. (Participant 2)

Working collaboratively helped to create a positive working environment and strengthen social bonds (Fredrickson, 2001). As stated by Participant 4, "I think everyone worked really well together, class enthusiasm and lecturer enthusiasm really brought it all together." The quantitative data presented in Table 1 also supports the notion that peer and lecturer relationships were strengthened. The lecturer provided guidance but also gave students a sense of agency. Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone (2020) found that their sample often described partnerships as being "enjoyable" or "fun," and this was reflected in the recognition that the enthusiasm helped to pull the project together and made it an enjoyable experience. Within this project, it was felt that the group worked well together, and that everyone knew their roles and were also willing to volunteer and get involved during the event. Given that the midway survey raised some concerns about role clarity, it was positive that students indicated that everyone knew their roles by the time that the event was run. A quarter of the sample recognized that the topic was more engaging because they were able to put theory into practice, which is supported by authentic assessment (Gulikers et al., 2004) and experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) literature.

However, the project was not without its challenges, with students recognizing the challenges of teamwork and communication. Previous studies identify reluctant student contribution and unpredictability as issues of groupwork (Gravett et al., 2020). Partnerships such as this one may also be inhibited by power relationships (Gravett et al., 2020), which can be within the student cohort or between students and staff. Within this project, students sometimes found it difficult to communicate with their peers outside of class time and the interconnectedness of tasks meant that students were occasionally waiting for others to complete their tasks before they could complete their own tasks.

The final challenging aspect of the project was the communication platform that was used for the project. Whilst it is suggested that the use of shared technology is useful for event projects (Steriopoulos et al., 2022), it was noted that the platform was difficult to use on a mobile phone or iPad. This meant that it was trickier for students to contribute to conversations quickly or on the move, so other forms of communication (i.e., WhatsApp groups) were developed in conjunction to the main platform.

CONCLUSION

This case study illustrates a SaP project whereby students had the opportunity to create and manage an event. They had ownership over the event, whilst still being guided by their lecturer. The collaborative nature of the project was a strength and helped to establish a shared space that broke down group identities, which is important when teaching students from a range of degrees.

During the project, issues with teamwork and collaboration were voiced. These are intertwined issues, and, unless managed, there can be miscommunication and inequalities in task allocation and performance. As these issues were raised early in the project, methods were established to help communication, such as class discussion. Constant feedback and discussion were key to the success of this project, with students feeling supported to voice their opinions. Establishing expectations and working towards a common goal also assisted the management of communication issues.

Whilst it was difficult developing and maintaining equal roles, it was beneficial to work collectively to develop peer and lecturer relationships. Overall, the partnership approach of the event project was perceived to be an enjoyable experience that gave students a sense of ownership. Without running the event, students would not have learnt about the complexities of event planning and the operation of an event, so it provided them with a more holistic overview of an event.

Authentic assessments and partnerships can be time consuming (Villarroel et al., 2018); however, the benefit to students can justify the additional efforts. The benefits and constraints could be explored in future research, including comparative studies across different disciplines or institutions and comparing staff and student perspectives. A limitation of this study is that it was focused on one event, whereas a comparison of projects may reveal insights into the factors that enable positive partnerships with students.

This research was reviewed and approved by the university human ethics committee.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Eliza Kitchen is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism & Events at Flinders University and specialises in event management. Her research focuses on the social impacts of events as well as authentic learning and student partnerships within events education.

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