Perspectives of authentic assessment and professional practice interventions in teaching and learning in UK Higher Education

Royce, M., Stevens, M., Jariwala, J., Soehren, D.,

Abstract

In supporting student preparation for professional business careers, universities are increasingly developing and designing teaching and learning practice which supports professional practice skills in addition to academic content. Within the UK, universities work alongside professional bodies to reflect changes in practice within an academic setting. In this way, the professional has input into the curriculum and assessment design, and this paper considers the authenticity of curriculum design and assessment in an authentic professional context. The practice elements of the paper reflect work embedded in module development in Liverpool John Moores University in the North West of England. The focus will be situated in the area of authentic assessment and its role within Human Resource Management professional practice. The paper will further look to the way in which professional practice authenticity can support student partnership and co-creation with module delivery and assessment.

Keywords: Authentic assessment, Professional practice, Teaching and Learning, Professional body Partnership, Student Co-creation.

Authors:

Royce, Maureen

Liverpool, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University

Associate Dean – Education, Liverpool Business School

m.a.royce@ljmu.ac.uk

Dr Stevens, Madeleine

Liverpool, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University

Senior Lecturer in HR, Liverpool Business School

M.Stevens@ljmu.ac.uk

Jariwala, Joshi

Liverpool, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University

Senior Lecturer in HR, Liverpool Business School

J.J.Jariwala@ljmu.ac.uk

Soehren, David

Liverpool, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University

Senior Lecturer in HR, Liverpool Business School

D.W. Soehren@ljmu.ac.uk

Understanding the nature of professional practice involves academic in a consideration of the volatility of the business environment as the context or practice and skills has been subject to rapid and consistent change (Kemmis, 2019; Lester, 1995). Such changes are technological and social but also reflect changes in the value systems of organisations. In England, higher education is regulated by the Office for Students (OfS) and their belief that students are experts in their own experience has encouraged English institutions to broaden student involvement in curriculum and assessment design and to explore the nature of co-created content involving students and academics. Advance HE is a British professional membership organisation promoting excellence in higher education who have advocated for a sector wide reappraisal of assessment. This is, in part, a reflection on market driven metrics relating to value for money education in respect of student fees but also acknowledges the changes in technology and the importance of knowledge contextualisation. Increasingly, a desire for authentic assessment which incorporates preparation for future learning and employment is influencing the culture of assessment in higher education.

In periods of rapid change, such as traditional environmental changes in Higher Education and the political impact, new technologies or as recently experience globally, the Covid pandemic, decisions on the knowledge content requires constant review and reinterpretation. A more significant area of change is around teaching delivery and interaction with students. The authors believe that the design of teaching sessions has become more complexed as guidance from external and internal stakeholders continues to focus on students' as consumer and their real life ability to gain employment upon graduation. This complexity reflects the ambition for authenticity and the integration of technology but also involves an appreciation of student involvement in the process of learning and assessment and the subsequent acquisition of skills. Lester (1995) argues that professionals, responding to change, have needed to become far more reflective, to embody principles, ethics and morals and these areas then also feed into the teaching and assessment environment. Teaching then moves from a description of the practice to a deeper understanding of the practice through co-created content which challenges students to apply knowledge, yet also to be aware of ethical judgement and awareness of alternative approaches. In taking this broader perspective, students learn to reflect and respond to change while developing skills which support their competence in delivering learning outcomes yet aligned within a professional environment. Within this paper, we explore practice-based teaching and learning within the Human Resource Management (HRM) profession and understanding how the relationship with the professional body, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) supports the framework for authentic assessment, that which reflect real-life situations. The European University Association in 2019 in discussing active learning supports this approach to teaching and learning believing in the importance of testing the application of knowledge in new and authentic situations, (EUA, 2019).

The assessment of competence that delineates the professional from others presents interesting challenges to the more traditional assessment strategies found in Higher Education. Lester (1995) would view application of reflection as an ongoing strategy as part of the assessment process. The questioning self-action provides a critical connection of theory and practice. Illustrating this, the CIPD advocates the importance of analytics. The ability to understand and interpret human resource (HR) metrics to guide policymaking and people practice is a growing essential requirement for HR practitioners (CIPD, 2017). The appreciation of metrics enhances problem solving and decision-making faculties associated with demonstrating acumen, (CIPD, 2018). This narrative lends itself to integrating employability into

both teaching and the way professional skills are assessed.   The EUA recognized that for teachers to maximize the impact of both technological competence and professional competencies in designing their programmes, teachers themselves needed to be supported by their institutions (EUA, 2019 p7). Institutions were encouraged to move forward in small steps and allow time and budget for experimentation as well as a culture of long-term planning. The case study example preparing students to investigate allegations and work within a legal framework provides an opportunity for reflection on the institutional cultural changes supporting the development of practitioner work.

Within the HR programmes, practitioner content and assessment started with some simple changes to develop content beyond theory and to engage students in co-creating content through their responses. For example, teaching the components of individual key metrics in HRM, e.g., staff turnover or sickness absence rate, has been integrated into the curriculum, in theory but only recently has a practice dimension been included. To resolve this deficiency, a database simulating a typical HR staff database was developed by students as part of an extra curriculum project. This database would serve many functions including the appreciation of what and how personal data is organised in workplaces, and the multiple uses not limited to sourcing, establishing patterns, benchmarking and predicting future people and organisational performance to guide and optimise business sustenance. In actively manipulating the data, the students were able to construct responses which were authentic and diverse. Additionally, as there was ownership of the data base, the core data could be adapted to reflect changing priorities reflecting a real-world environment.

Cole et al. (2011) explores the cultural gap between the relatively positivistic professional practice and wider theoretical questioning of the academic world. Through the use of real world co-created data, the students are able to identify for themselves the ethical and organisational dilemmas arising from the creation and interpretation of data. They echo Lester's (1995) model with their call for greater reflexivity or a questioning of assumptions and bias. Such models of working bring students into the co-creation of the curriculum areas and allow for reflexivity which may challenge both teaching and learning and organisational practice models.

In 2018, George Huh provided the keynote address at LJMU's Teaching and Learning conference where he shared his concept of Teaching High Impact Practices (HIPs). Discussion and reflection following this address led academic leaders at LJMU to understand that much of

their work in the field of business practice is based on promoting deep learning by promoting student retention, engagement and performance. Beyond that, working within a HIP framework, creates parity between students within a large range of social/economic situations. This has been achieved through curriculum design, assessment and facilitation with content co-created by students. A further example of student engagement with content can be seen through the design and deliver of assessment centres testing competencies for recruitment purposes. In this example the students choose a job role and identify and measure key competencies related to the job. Collectively, students design an assessment centre using a range of measurements to make a recruitment decision. The students alternatively play the part of assessors and applicants allowing academics to report on both the knowledge and practical application in designing the measurement tasks that identify candidates for employment, but also on the way in which the student responds as an applicant looking for employment. The feedback from both perspectives allows for a rich reflection on knowledge, skills and behaviours and employability readiness. The structure involves students in design influenced by selection theory. The requirement to put their designs into practice increases the performance expectation, encourages students to earn higher grades and retain, integrate and transfer information at higher rates. There is potential for professional practice learning and assessment similar to this case example to build on the individuality of student knowledge and experience and accelerate the development of peer and independent learning. The student view of practice-based learning was captured in a paper to the LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference in 2019 'Student Partners in Designing Professional Content and assessment'. Students reflected on how a blend of practice based 'modules' within a programme enhanced student independence and accelerated the acquisition of skills more usually only learned from employment rather than an academic environment. The importance of behaviours in transforming organisational practice has long been recognised by those theorising learning and change. The behavioural aspects are complex and rely on the integration of a number of components which might include the acquisition of knowledge, the distribution of information through communication channels, the interpretation of information and finally the collective memory to capitalise on the learning for the future. Huber in 1991, outlines these components and recognises that individual learning does not translate into collective learning without additional stages and positive behavioural interventions. In moving students into a sphere where their individual learning influences the

collective, practice - based learning prepares students to contribute quickly to a rapidly changing work environment.

Professional practice is a contested area. Involvement of students in co-creating materials and operating with real world models one where new skills, such as reflection and reflexivity are being promoted alongside theoretical perspectives. In the next section, we will discuss authentic assessment and how it might help embed, develop and support practice in business teaching.

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment is a summative assessment where the student has a task that mimics a real-world task rather than a traditional assessment such as essay or exam. In Villarroel et al's. (2018) review of authentic assessment, thirteen consistent characteristics are identified and classified into three conceptual dimensions: realism, cognitive challenge and evaluative judgement. Realism relates to the level by which the assessment mimics problems or activities found in practice and replicating the performance standards expected. Cognitive challenges refer to the high order thinking skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making. Evaluative judgement proposes how the student should be involved in creating the criteria by which the performance is judged and be more aware of this, in order to self-regulate and improve their behaviour such as through self- assessment and reflection. Authentic assessment can be seen as a challenge to traditional assessment practices within education, which fail to provide methods for students to practice their developing skills and knowledge.   This in itself can be seen as a challenge to the professionalism of academic practice, as external bodies exert more control. We could however view authentic assessment as a dialogue or exchange around values and skills within professional practice.

Case study: Strategic HR Competencies- Investigating complaints and preparing for legal process

A competency is defined as the ability to use the appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities to successfully complete a specific job-related task (Russo, 2016). CIPD (2013) states that in order to be able to handle conflict, HR professionals must attain the following competencies:

curiosity, decisive thinker, skilled influencer, credibility, collaborative, driven to deliver, courage to challenge and a role modelling. The content was designed to build and practice these competencies, ratified through students' in-class experiences and personal reflection.

This case study example illustrating this can be seen through a CIPD accredited module for final year undergraduate students on the BA (Hons) Human Resource Management programme. In the UK these tribunals hear cases relating to breaches of contract and/or Employment Law. During 2020, single employment tribunals and caseloads increased by 13% and 22% respectively compared to a year ago with 19,000 multiple claims receive in the quarter during July to September 2000. (Gov.uk, 2020). With this significant number of cases, we cannot ignore the importance of this aspect of an HR practitioner's role.

Due consideration is given to individual student levels of confidence and as a result, all tribunal roles are adopted on a voluntary basis. In taking responsibility for differing roles in the case study, students learn to work collaboratively with each other but also independently of direct academic direction. Students make choices about their approach to the problems presented and the consequences of the decisions they make and are assessed on five reflective elements. A key part of the learning is for HR students to appreciate at their own pace, that it is essential for HR to develop a positive working environment that fosters good teamwork that helps with employee engagement and performance as suggested by Lo et al. (2015) and Sunahwati and Prusak (2018). The module content also aims to allow students to learn practice-based skills and awareness of competencies such as the importance of HR practitioners processing and demonstrating good levels of resilience, curiosity and to be organised as business environments are very complex (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020). The students shape the curriculum. The case study is designed to illicit responses from four fictitious groups; Organisational HR Department; aggrieved individuals seeking redress for a breach; the line managers involved in the decisions which have led to the claim for a breach of policy or employment law and the ET panel members.

Each group receives a set of initial notes which differ in context and from this information, students reflect their own perspective and version of truth. In this way the students are involved in the co-creation of the case and have responsibility for shaping the context as they use their own knowledge and judgement. Parallel lecture sessions ensure that key organisational and

legal principles and theory have been understood by all four groups. with the exception of the ET panel which has to hear the case and decisions taken by the HR department objectively. The groups do not share this information. The practice-based role play is supported by knowledge creating short lectures on the legal, policy and theory context relevant to the case. The students then perform in a role play and respond to information as it emerges from the other groups and the academic leader of the module. The module concludes with a mock trial, which is video recorded so that students can use this to reflect on their levels of knowledge, preparation and decision making. The ET panel members collectively decide on a suitable outcome of the case and calculate an award based on legal knowledge gained through lectures. The assessment is reflexive, relates to the work of Cole et al. (2011) evaluation and critique in the following areas: HR competencies in managing conflict; good practice in investigations; justification of organisational and individual actions; preparation for and delivery of tribunal role play and documentation; reflection on organisational process improvement. Student feedback in this practice-based module is strong with students reflecting on the extent to which the ability to work with real time changing scenarios helped prepare them for work in their chosen profession.

The evaluation process for professional practice academic delivery and assessment must respond to flexibility in the choices made by the students during the course of the module and student involvement in understanding the multiple layers of complexity inevitably requires academic time and resources. While the students are independent learners for much of the assessment the curation and facilitation of the academic lead requires both professional practice knowledge and skill in integrating the two worlds of academic rigor and clinical business practice.

Professional Body Relationship

Pofessional body involvement ratifies the behavioural and skills aspects of professional practice delivery. The involvement of the professional body allows practitioner expertise into the academic space and enhances authenticity.The CIPD skills and behavioural framework for practitioners is embedded into the academic delivery of modules within accredited programmes. The BA (Hons) Human Resource Management used in the case study examples discussed within this paper has been fully accredited to deliver professional standards. CIPD have emphasised the demonstration of business acumen in HR practitioners and recognises

(CIPD, 2018) the importance of integrating professional practice into the Higher Education curriculum to prepare students for employment. The close working relationship between the professional body, CIPD and the academic subject leaders created a partnership with the students evident in the development of materials, delivery and assessment of practitioner work involving data base analysis, assessment of competencies for recruitment and the investigation and decision making involved in the tribunal.

Authentic assessment design flows from the case study and requires the students to begin to walk in each other's shoes as they develop their responses. The identification of criteria broad enough to recognise the refinement of the roles each student or group takes plays a critical role in developing trust in the process and ensuring clarity of purpose. While the authentic nature of the delivery requires student interaction and communication the reflexivity on responses and actions forms the central focus of the assessment. The module design identifies learning outcomes related to knowledge and practice and these learning outcomes are assessed once the case study tribunal and judgement have been reached.

The reflective assessment of the module aligned directly with the learning outcomes as detailed below:

After completing the module the student should be able to:

1. Evaluate key contemporary disciplinary and grievance issues affecting the HR function within private, public and third sector organisations.

2. Analyse the root causes of disciplinary and grievance action.

3. Review key contemporary business methods in preventing and resolving disciplinary and grievance issues.

4. Reflect on the preparation and execution of an Employment Tribunal from an HR perspective.

The students do not then, only consider the facts of the case study and make judgements on possible responses, they also consider why the situation developed through the case might have occurred and how it might be possible to create interventions to prevent similar circumstances arising in the future. Accordingly, students were asked to prepare a 2000 word-report, reflecting on areas of potential process improvement, specific to the in-class presented Employment Tribunal claim. The assignment needs to highlight and apply all relevant areas of

policy improvement, relevant legislation and literature. Students were given guidance on content under the following headings:

- Evaluate, critique and reflect on the management of disciplinary and grievance issues.
- Use of literature / academic referencing
- Draws on relevant sources to support the arguments-
- Integrates theory with practice to tease out problems, opportunities and new possibilities. -academic-practitioner and discusses the following areas for reflection:
  - HR competencies in managing conflict
  - Good practice in investigations
  - Justifying action taken
  - Preparing tribunal bundle
  - Reflection on process improvement

The students share locus of control, between themselves, the tutors and the professional bodies but the student also needs to validate their own agency in the space in order to develop their skills, knowledge and begin to embody their practice. Active student learning is the focus, but additionally an opportunity for feedback on in class behaviours and reflections is created. For this to happen, the student needs to be empowered to employ their own skills, knowledge and judgement to complete this assessment. Bovil (2020) suggests that co-creation is a meaningful collaboration between students and tutors and the preparation of a response to a case study where the student's judgement guides the next steps in the process is an example of how this can work in practice. The student is guided and supported in holding the knowledge required but there is independence of decision making which influences the development of the content and suggests genuine engagement in a co-creative process.

The next generation of professionals will no doubt work in more diverse teams and the opportunity to work collaboratively in a safe environment will support the development of skills and competencies supportive of change and diversity. They will need to work and develop relationships in the virtual as well as the physical world and the need for shared community understanding of practice and behaviours will be even more evident than it is today. Their ability to boundary cross will increasingly become an important skill within their practice. The importance of design in content and authentic assessments supports the development of these skills. It is important to note that the learning is not confined to students. In seeking to create

authentic delivery and assessments, the role of staff development must be considered as crucial. Institutions with long histories of developing research and academic practice may be challenged by the need to engage tutors with a greater understanding of context and practice. For some tutors, time spent outside the institution or linked mentoring arrangements with the professional world may be needed to support the contextual and behavioural elements of authentic delivery and practice. For this to be successful, time and energy would need to be diverted to ensure that tutors can facilitate the diversity of co-created work with confidence. Professional practice experience will need to become part of the academic toolkit if tutors are to successfully embed authentic design into their modules and programmes.

Reflexive practice is at the heart of the module Strategic HR Competencies which has been discussed as the main case study in this paper. Given this, it is important to understand the reflection from students post participation and this next section will move on to look at the qualitative student feedback from 2020 and 2021. The first student demonstrates how their learning developed through critiquing the approach adopted by the fictitious HR department:

> *'The grievance policy states that its purpose is "to produce a quick resolution where genuine problems exist...in an atmosphere of trust and collaboration". Throughout the process of this investigation, the HR team adhered by this statement, investigating the issue, and attempting to work with all employees concerned in the matter, whilst trying to create a resolution quickly and effectively. Despite this, upon reflection, there are some areas which could have been approached alternatively, that may have improved the effectiveness of the investigation and lessened its impact on the organisation.'*

Within this statement it can be seen that the student is developing a sense of confidence in their own personal judgement and so have moved beyond a passive understanding of the application of policy to one of understanding impact and consequences. In reviewing this the student has also moved towards generating alternative options in an organisational context so developing authentic professional skills for the future.

The personal benefits of the role play are expressed by this student who also successfully critically evaluate the processes followed by the fictitious HR department underpinned by UK employment law, which demonstrates her learning:

'The role play was useful to see because if enabled be to understand that from his perspective he felt anxious or nervous during this time as he was worried that his colleagues were talking about his sudden absence. In addition to that, when looking at the suspension letter that Pete was sent, the ACAS code of practice (2015) has helped me understand how the letter was too brief and lacks context. The letter only states that "allegations of gross misconduct" have been made; however, it does not specify exactly what happened. This outcome has taught me that it is important to be specific with the employee especially where suspension is involved as the lack of information could make the employee reluctant to co-operate or not trust that the organisation is treating them fairly (could result in investigation being prolonged). Lastly, in Pete's minutes HR inform him that he will not be on shift with Suzie for a while and that mediation will be offered to resolve the issue.' Student B.

Problems are correctly identified by this student who noticed errors in process and investigation protocols, demonstrating her learning and creative thinking by proposing alternative solutions:

'The mock trial highlighted some problems, and it was observed that the process was not robust, reflecting a lack of documentation and appropriate investigation procedures that HR should have conducted. The set of documents used at times offered mixed views and contradictions with Suzie having a clear profile on one document but then there were some other claims that Suzie allegedly went to work after having consumed alcohol and had been warned about such behaviour. If there was a more explicit way of tracking the paperwork, than management would have been transparent and only talked based on evidence and avoid claims that are not supported by facts. This could be improved by developing a better staff monitoring systems that provides clear guidance as to how to record and store any documents where employees do not company with organisation's working expectations.' Student C.

Evidence of personal learning is included in this student's reflection that highlights the importance of resolving a complaint professionally to avoid time consuming grievances and legal action through employment tribunals. She also includes suitable recommendations of how to address potential further occurances:

> *'For me the most important aspect of the HR managers role is the responsibility and duty of care to employees to prevent, investigate and manage any report of misconduct. Having experienced the mock tribunal, I have realised the importance of trying the resolve the complaint in a serious, professional manner to avoid the potential of creating further distress and potentially resulting in an employment tribunal. I believe that prevention and awareness can mitigate any future misconduct issues in the workplace. As a HR professional to prevent any further occurrences I would set up an anti-harassment campaign to show clarity on organisational tolerance for sexual harassment'* Student D.

The value of the practices-based experience from an inclusive perspective is revealed in the following feedback from a neurodivergent student:

> *'Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this experience. It gave me an insight of the skills which are needed to investigate and prepare for a tribunal case. I particularly liked how the work was practical as it allowed me to understand how real-life scenarios worked which helped me gain a better understanding of the module'.*

Conclusions: Implications for practice

Significant responsibility lies with the design element of the module and the integration of academic knowledge and practice support the creation of a coherent design which clearly defines the key elements of professional practice being delivered by the module. The defining of the skills, knowledge, values and behaviours are significant and need to blend with the knowledge content to ensure coherence in the learning experience. This paper has presented different visions from the academic literature and practice examples in teaching, learning and assessment but there is more work to be undertaken in developing academic practice. This practice may be informed by professional bodies discourse and definitions or may be the outcome of collaborative work with expert practitioners and associated organisations. The Business School in LJMU have provided the opportunity for academic and student to come together in shared spaces where theoretical concepts and business practice are explored together. In a world of rapid change, it becomes important that this shared space

expands and that developmental work is not considered in isolation but in a culture of collaborative learning.

To achieve this there is a need for shared conceptual language and discourse. The descriptions of professional practice will differ depending on which community is discussing it. A three-way partnership between professional practitioners, academics and students will support a shared understanding. This development in collaborative learning will be beneficial. Cooke Sather (2014) suggests that appreciating variation and diversity in outcomes supports the development of the student in collaboration. The academic development requirements and resourcing needs associated with professional practice literacy will take time to develop and this needs to be recognised by institutions as they move into the culture of professional practice.

Bovil (2016, 2020) points to the need for clarity in the design of assessment for practice related modules. Assessment practice may be narrowly defined within institutional culture and the individualistic and diverse approach to practice-based assessment may not fit well with organisational processes designed to provide metrics and standardisation. For academics, the need to capture data on student outcomes resulting from practice based assessments, will form part of the progression route to establishing professional practice design in business modules as standard.

The development of professional practice teaching and assessment requires commonality of purpose between the academic and student but also an appreciative institutional position with regard to preparation time and engagement with external supporting stakeholders. The outcomes as revealed through student confidence, engagement and enhanced critical thinking support the effort required to make professional practice a sustainable part of student learning.

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