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## **Introducing a peer learning approach to assessment preparation.**

### **Abstract**

When working with children and young people practitioners have a duty of care; safeguarding is everyone's responsibility (DfE, 2015, p. 9), therefore it is essential to prepare students for their future professional roles and responsibilities. This paper discusses the introduction of an experimental teaching session that develops a peer learning activity during a scheduled lecture. Informed by the theories of action learning, reflection and peer learning I adapted a reflective Triad Model based on the work of Renzulli, (Garcia-Cepero, 2008) and coteaching (Roth and Tobin, 2002) to explore student engagement. The experiment was introduced as an optional activity to prepare the students for an assessed task that is akin to a professional conversation. Assessment requires the student to be both practitioner and researcher, and enables assessment of learning from 'evidenced based experience' (Light, Cox and Calkins, 2009 p. 224). Engagement with the peer learning activity was not entirely successful, with few students meeting in peer triads, however, a debriefing discussion with the students enabled a greater understanding of the limiting factors surrounding the task and will be informative for future cohorts undertaking the module.

### **Introduction and rationale for the experimental teaching.**

Safeguarding Children and Young People is a module that second year students on a range of undergraduate courses attend, for some students it is a mandatory module and others optional. All students are enrolled on courses that aim to develop future professionals who have responsibility for the care, development and educational achievement of children and young people. Delivery is through a 2 hour lecture and there are currently 146 students attending on Friday afternoons at 3:15pm.

The assessment of the module is the focus for my experimental teaching. Students currently sit an online test early in the teaching schedule which equates to 20% of the overall mark, students receive an instant grade through Unilearn. A further 80% is gained during a practical oral assessment taken at the end of the module and assesses students' knowledge and skills through a practical simulated scenario,

similar to having a professional conversation about a safeguarding concern. During a 20 minute dialogue the student is required to answer questions from 3 different perspectives, the child, parent and professional, and conclude with a discussion about a particular area of safeguarding practice that they have researched. Students are graded on their ability to apply the principles of safeguarding and relate their new knowledge and skills to their practice, using real world experiences (Robinson, 2008).

Student feedback on the module in 2014/15 was essentially positive. Students reported feeling challenged by the style of assessment, however they also reported that the assessment experience was relevant to their potential work situation/practice. Significantly a number of students commented that they would have liked an opportunity to practice for the assessment, something that is currently not planned for formally. During the lectures there are opportunities to share ideas and think through solutions to problems, this can be in pairs or small groups turning around in their seats but the lecture theatre is not conducive to group work in the same way as a seminar session. Staff involved in the assessment last year also shared that a number of students had been less prepared with their research topic.

Concerns about student engagement and assessment preparation provided the impetus for this Inspire conference paper. I considered the notion of engaging a large group of students and preparing for a professional conversation, influenced by the theories and perspectives of reflection (Schon 1991), action learning (Revans 1980) and peer learning through socio-constructivism based on Vygotsky's theory (Topping 2005, Darnis and Lafont, 2015). Understanding the different perspectives stirred my professional curiosity and personal belief that engaging students in reflective activities had and continues to have the potential to add value and meaning to their learning. Creating a peer learning activity that supported research skills and enabled students to understand the importance of speaking in a professional context became the driver for this experimental teaching session.

### **Literature review and theoretical framework.**

Students undertaking the safeguarding module are practitioners, teachers and youth workers of the future. They have opportunities to gain experience of working with children and young people through working in voluntary positions and attending placement as a requirement of their courses. Ultimately after graduation they will be seeking employment in the disciplines of Youth and Community Work, Early Education and Teaching and Social Care (University of Huddersfield, 2015). Furthermore understanding and developing the knowledge of safe practice in relation to keeping children and young people's wellbeing at the centre of their work, is a crucial aspect of their learning. Ensuring they become confident and capable practitioners, able to take responsibility for keeping children safe, attending to their needs and protecting from harm (DfE, 2015).

Students therefore need to be familiar with legislation that governs the work of professionals (DfE, 2015), as during their time in the University they will encounter placement experiences that have statutory duties in accordance with their Local Authority policies and practices. The 1989 and 2004 Children Acts place clear responsibilities on settings, both private and voluntary including schools to promote the welfare of all children and young people (DfE, 2015). Both Acts alongside the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified in England in 1991 and the Equality Act 2010, legislate for the need to be aware of and respect the wishes and feelings of children.

Students future employability can be enhanced through gaining skills for the world of work (Robinson, 2008) and there is a growing demand from both students and employers that higher education courses are fit for purpose and meet the demands of the employment market (Atkinson, 2015). With this in mind it is necessary for students to be confident in their safeguarding duties, as this offers an opportunity to develop strategies and embed skills that will enhance future employment readiness. Gardiner (1998) suggests embedding these skills should be essential components for today's courses.

The concept of 'graduateness' is difficult to define (Atkinson 2015), the term is often used but has multiple meanings; likewise Moon (2004, p 73) offers an option to

relate 'graduateness to developing professionalism and the skills of employability. The explanation that resonates with my understanding of developing professionalism, is one that allows for the development of transferable attributes and professional skills that provide a strong platform for future employment. The safeguarding module aims to fulfill this criteria offering varied learning opportunities, through lectures, group discussion and drawing on their experiences during placement.

Engaging and motivating students in the subject of safeguarding offers opportunities for key learning from real examples, enabling students to understand the different demands they might face and as future practitioners. In practice they will be expected to make informed decisions that keep children's needs at the centre of their work. Legislation dictates that 'safeguarding is everyone's responsibility' (DfE, 2015), it is crucial therefore that students encounter situations where they are required to work with professionals from different agencies, manage expectations of parents and carers, while balancing the rights of the child or young person. This requires students to be active learners who have the ability to make sense of various policies and understand the implications that their decisions have on the lives of children and families.

Revan's praxeology of action learning offers one way to theorize and explore students' values and beliefs (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2010). Graves and Jones (2008) make the claim that using an action learning approach in higher education is a relatively new concept especially when used to maximize the links between theory and practice. Nonetheless it has particular relevance when exploring the potential for problem solving (Revans, 1980), this is noteworthy as the students often find themselves working in a multi-disciplinary environment subject to constant change and political pressures. Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) take Revans theory of 'there can be no learning without action and no action without learning' one stage further and suggest the potential exists to develop a deeper production of knowledge. This aspect was influential when planning for the experimental session, and a consideration for encouraging peer learning.

When considering learning 'in and from' action together with students as active participants in their own learning, promoting an action learning approach can help students to become reflective practitioners (Graves and Jones, 2008). This culture of reflection is nurtured and integral to the wider undergraduate curriculum for students who are studying professionalism in the caring professions. The models of reflection associated with Kolb, 1984 and Gibbs, 1988 have been informative in the preparation for this paper (Cowan, 2006), however I was interested in the parallels between action learning and Schon's model of reflection 'in and on' action (Schon 1991). Especially in relation to the way reflection 'on' action enables practitioners to problem solve safeguarding issues (Wilson, 2016, p 33).

The challenge therefore to develop a culture of reflection 'on' action through collaboration during the lectures and throughout the module was, and continues to be of interest. One such way to achieve collaboration suggest Graves and Jones (2010) is to integrate action learning sets as they have the potential to promote capable, confident independent learners who have the time and space to be active and reflect. The process of co-learning through action learning sets has resonance with coteaching, viewed as learning in 'praxis' or action (Roth and Tobin, 2004). However, this approach has its own challenges and it should not be assumed that students when engaging in learning in a large lecture theatre have the necessary academic skills to engage in the process (Hamilton 2013).

The traditional large lecture is often criticized and under scrutiny as being an ineffective way to prepare students for graduate work (Atkinson, 2015). This is understandable as the environment is not conducive to working in small groups. The perceived barriers of seating in rows with up to 150 students in attendance is reality and can as Hamilton (2013) suggests, affect learning and teaching. Nevertheless it is important to find creative ways to overcome any potential hindrances in order to equip students for the present and prepare them for the future. Their future work environment is open ended and challenging, therefore developing students who can understand the 'how', of practice alongside the 'why' of theory is a necessary skill (Brockbank and McGill 2007).

Gubera and Aruguete (2013) discuss the need for a balance of cooperative activities alongside lectures, with collaborative learning being perceived to enhance student motivation when planned and delivered in a meaningful way. With this in mind, action learning and reflection both allow the opportunity for students to reflect on their own experiences. The students have a wealth of experience to bring to the lecture through a variety of placements, these life experiences shape and influence their social construction of knowledge (Brockbank and McGill, 2007).

### **Students as learners and teachers.**

The benefits of working and learning with peers is well documented and often occurs incidentally when groups of students form friendships (Topping, 2005). There is a perception that cooperation and collaboration will develop naturally however Hilsdon (2013) proposes the notion that true peer learning requires structure and is more than working together; rather it is concerned with achieving shared goals. Explicit peer learning, encouraging students to engage in structured activities cannot be assumed but requires planning and encouragement (Hilsdon, 2013).

Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2001) agree that ad hoc arrangements exist but that encouraging formalized peer learning promotes students abilities to take responsibility and control for their own learning. Furthermore making connections between experiential learning and new knowledge is possible when working with peers. This allows for the development of interactive processes drawing on Vygotsky's concept of socio-constructivism (Darnis and Lafont, p 460). Learning is scaffolded through verbal interactions with knowledgeable others (Daniels 2001, Smidt 2009) confirming the benefits of peer learning when organized and implemented well (Topping 2005).

Topping (2005) suggests that there have been a number of researchers who throughout the last 25 years, have attempted to theorize peer learning. Of significance to this paper is the concept of peers challenging each other to develop cognitively using peer activities to listen, explain, question and summarize. Topping continues that developing such skills situates the learning in Vygotsky's terms. Additionally, Darnis and Lafont (2015) emphasize the importance of social interaction, leading to the development of deeper learning through communication

and interactions with others; both highlight this combination offering a model for competent performance.

Developing an environment for collaborative peer learning is also influenced by pedagogical paradigms, proposes Garcia-Cepero (2008), and is dependent on opposing beliefs that knowledge is either delivered to students or through reciprocal relationships. Conflict between these two models can be charted through history and Garcia-Ceparo cites Not (1979/1994) who explored an alternative inter-structured approach which acknowledges the student as an active learner. Based on this theory Renzulli identified two models of pedagogy, deductive, dictated by the teacher and inductive, which encourages high order learning through real life experiences (Garcia-Ceparo, 2008, p297). Whist Renzulli acknowledges that both have a place in education he offers an inter-structured approach to teaching through the Enrichment Triad Model (ETM) a three level approach to expanding learning. The ETM model involves integrating a series of enrichment activities into the regular curriculum, combined with the reflective Triad Model discussed earlier the possibility of developing reciprocal learning (Roth and Tobin, 2004) was explored further through the experimental teaching session.

### **Implementing the experiment, what did I do?**

The aim of my experimental teaching session was to encourage collaborative learning with a particular focus on the students exploring and understanding the benefits of preparing for the research element of the summative assessment. My initial thoughts developed from the perception that high numbers of students attending lectures experience barriers to their learning. This view, although based on observation and anecdotal evidence was also informed by discussions with colleagues and literature. Leading to the understanding that traditional lecturers are considered to be limited in their ability to develop an effective range of skills (Atkinson, 2015). Enabling students in large lectures to be able to gain learning that is meaningful for their practice was and continues to be a challenge. As suggested previously, the environment in a lecture theatre doesn't easily allow for reciprocal learning. I was, however, conscious that the students have knowledge and experiences both new and from previous roles that if shared could help themselves and others to reflect.

The module has a number of informative lectures based on key legislation and working practices assessed through the online element early in the module. Prior to the Christmas break the second part of the assessment is introduced and this requires the student to reflect on their learning and experience through a simulated professional conversation. Previously, students have had the process explained to them through information posted on the University portal and through lecture presentations. For the experiment I used time in the lecture, teaching week 11, to introduce the concept of an enrichment activity (Renzulli and Reis, 2014, p 33) using a peer learning approach to prepare for the assessment conversation.

During the teaching session I explained to the students the background and rationale of the activity, introducing the approach as new way of preparing for the assessment. I decided not to make the activity a mandatory task, rather hoping to encourage learning through mutually beneficial cooperation (Boud, Cohen and Sampson 2001). Students were asked to form groups of three, based on the concept of coteaching (Roth and Tobin, 2004) engaging in small action learning sets, reflective triads. One to share their research ideas, one to listen and engage in a reflective conversation and one to act as a critical observer and offer feedback. Therefore encouraging a professional conversation to develop through a reflective framework (Schon, 1991), reflecting 'in' the action of peer engagement and 'on' their own learning through the action of research and practice.

Organizing the groups was not something I perceived to be a problem, as students were typically seated in friendship groups. Some students asked to work in groups of four and this was tolerated although not encouraged in order to facilitate the triad model. After the explanation students were then asked to use the following weeks lecture time for independent study, focusing on the peer task should they choose to use the idea. Using independent study time effectively is a concept students feel uncomfortable with (Hamilton 2013), therefore I used information presented in a PowerPoint to explain the process of the pre-assessment research task and pose some questions to provoke discussion and reflection.

### Reviewing the experiment, did it work what happened and why?

Bearing in mind the last week of the semester week, 12 would ordinarily involve attending a lecture, the preparation for assessment task had been introduced to coincide with the planned lecture time. The students were therefore not expected to attend but use the time to complete their pre-assessment task. On reflection, I was aware that students would be keen to travel or return home for the holiday period, offering them the chance to not attend the lecture was for them a prospective bonus. Staying at University to work with peers was always going to be influenced by personal plans. To mitigate this I had explained to students that the peer work could be undertaken at a convenient time for them, and prior to the de-brief session. I also uploaded to the University portal the PowerPoint and a number of case studies, video clips and articles to support thinking and preparation for the research task.

Prior to the de-brief session in February students were reminded through the Unilearn online announcement that the lecture on 12<sup>th</sup> February would consist of preparation for assessment including reviewing the peer activity, so were prepared for the discussion. I opened the session with a recap of the task, using three key slides from the original presentation and encouraged discussion, initially in groups. After a short time I invited thoughts and comments on the process; I did however ask for honesty, it was important for me to understand whether they had participated in the activity and if not what had prevented them from doing so? The consensus in the room was that the majority of the students hadn't fully engaged in the activity.

Students were nevertheless happy to give reasons why and I have summarized their responses below. They fall into two themes:

Theme	Summary of comments from students who didn't complete the pre-assessment task	Summary of comments from students who completed the pre-assessment task
Timing	Last session just before the Christmas break and they saw it as a way to leave University early. Felt that they were expected to delay their journey home or come back early from holiday to complete the task and didn't want to do this. Intended to get together later but forgot about it.	We made time by arranging a skype session. We all live in the local area so getting together wasn't a problem, we met up in consolidation week.
Motivation	The task wasn't being assessed so why do it? I did look at the case study on line but forgot about the task. We have ages and I couldn't decide what topic to focus on. I didn't look at the announcement in time so wasn't reminded of the task	The activity helped me to narrow the research as I had included too much information.

### **Reflection on the peer learning activity using the reflective model.**

Scrutiny of the feedback confirms that the students did not enthusiastically engage in the peer learning activity, this small scale experiment was a voluntary activity for the students and the results were not expected to be generalizable. Topping (2005) suggests that in order to embed peer learning, succession planning is necessary and this will need to be considered for future cohorts. However perhaps the most significant issue for consideration is about non-engagement due to the task not being assessed formally, which was clearly captured in the comments. The commitment to carry out the peer group work during independent study was not felt to be a high priority, even though the students had been given clear direction from the PowerPoint and, also time during the last week of the semester. The opportunity to go home early was more attractive. Students had been encouraged to use the online portal to generate some research ideas, this content did appear to be useful to some, however a large number of students said that they had forgotten about the activity once they had finished for the holiday.

Of the students who did meet and discuss their research ideas the triad approach had not been used, the students arranged to work with a partner (two groups offered their feedback) and contact each other via the internet. These two groups of students did comment that they found the process helpful, if only to help them to filter their research ideas. Analysis of the comments overall appeared to broadly fall into two themes: timing and motivation. What is the opportune and most effective time to introduce a peer learning activity and how motivated are students to engage in such learning? I am mindful that the activity although perceived to be informative by myself as tutor was less important to the student as it is not integral to the assessment and assessed independently.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion I will be continuing to teach the safeguarding module through a large lecture format for the foreseeable future and numbers are set to grow in the coming academic year. This will mean approximately 180 students attending lectures. Therefore it can be deduced that the challenges of engaging so many students will continue, the impetus will be on finding creative ways to motivate students and prepare them for future practice (Atkinson, 2015). Focusing on the experimental

teaching session alone has given me the confidence to try new techniques, not only in preparing for assessment but with student engagement.

Would I introduce peer learning again? From my perspective the answer is yes, I will have to consider the timing and approach with the students addressing their concerns. For example expecting them to undertake group work during the holiday period. However, the suggestion that arranging to communicate via the internet might encourage at least a number of them to work together online.

From the students' perspective, it will be more challenging to change the belief that engaging in an activity is only of value if there is an assessed element. Whilst this may not be the only reason for non-engagement it is nevertheless significant. This approach to collaborative working could be perceived as an underlying factor for student motivation and may be indicative of wider student engagement; therefore one that merits further consideration. This module is about developing skills and preparing for the workplace, consequently lack of motivation could be transferred to practice. I continue to be of the belief that collaborative peer learning can encourage transferable skills and prepare students for the graduate workplace. Time and space to reflect on research and practice has a place in the large lecture; challenges therefore need to be creatively overcome in order to extend knowledge and practice and enhance student employability.

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