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Student screencasts within a learning partnership

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Published Version

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Becker, L. M. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7629-3757 (2019) Student screencasts within a learning partnership. Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal, 2 (2). pp. 133-140. ISSN 2399-1836 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86369/

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Student screencasts within a learning partnership

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Summary

Nine years ago I introduced an academic placement scheme within the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading, whereby students can elect to convert some of their modules into 'placement modules'. Within the scheme, students attend all the lectures and seminars for the module, and take the exam, but they replace the coursework (usually an assessed essay) with a placement report. Their report is based on an academic placement, which is a research project that takes place usually over two weeks, within an organisation away from the university or within our university archives. For example, a student on a Shakespeare module might analyse, over a rehearsal and performance run, how a director handles a text when it is to be played outdoors, or a student on a module on early novels might examine how a publisher packages novels for different readerships.

This academic placement scheme has grown in popularity over the years, from just nine students in 2008-9, to over one hundred in this academic year. The scheme is advertised on noticeboards, through shout-outs in lectures and seminars, and through our virtual learning environment. An academic placement is never a compulsory part of any student's degree programme. Students undertaking academic placements are self-selecting: they approach me as the placement tutor for the department asking me to guide them through the process and to help them develop ideas for an academic placement and to source contacts.

What makes this a learning partnership is the move from an engaged student undertaking a placement provided by a university (the more usual scenario) to a student working in partnership with a module convenor (and with me as placement tutor) to see together how the knowledge or skills acquired on a module could be of relevance in another setting. It is the student who must then translate this into a workable research project (one that often benefits the academic placement provider) and produce a report that analyses that experience in such a way as to meet the academic learning and assessment outcomes of the module.

This scheme is unique in the UK, as far as I am aware, because the students, rather than academics, approach potential placement providers and negotiate the scope of the placement project and the practical placement details. We do not offer any placements, and no placement is undertaken purely as a professional experience: it is an academic undertaking that links to, and is assessed as part of, a standard academic module. This is why it is called an academic placement scheme: to distinguish it from work experience or professional placements.

Description of the screen-casting project

In 2014 a group of six final year students approached me asking for help with creating academic placements in social media. Two of them were aiming for careers in this area, one of them wanted to teach and the remaining three had no career goals in mind, but they all wanted to 'try out' a new form of assessment, they all wanted an academic placement to highlight on their CVs and they all wanted an adventure. Between them, the modules they hoped to convert were 'Shakespeare on Film' and 'Writing Women: Nineteenth Century Poetry'. I had been contemplating how we might help our students become digitally ready for the career marketplace and having this group of final year students approach me, gave a real sense of partnership from the outset, as I outlined a new type of placement that we might try.

The idea I had already been considering was to have students create several 3-4 minute screencasts for public consumption on YouTube, using subject specific knowledge to reach out to an audience other than undergraduates. We anticipated that this audience would predominantly comprise 'A' level students, but might also be a general interest audience. I worked in partnership with each student to create the screencasts, but they had to engage with the learning intentions on a module, and with each other in the planning stages of each screencast. This was the first time that I had run a group academic placement project. Although the students did not work for an external organisation, we designated the project as an academic placement as it demanded many of the same skills, knowledge and qualities as an external academic placement, and the product was external facing.

The scheme was funded by the *University of Reading Annual Fund*, and this allowed me to buy equipment and screencasting licences, and to set up a YouTube Channel 'English Literature at the University of Reading' on which these screencasts are hosted.

The funding also meant that several of the screencasts could be interpreted onscreen into British Sign Language. This was important, as our primary audience members were likely to be school pupils and I wanted to show them that university life and learning in their area would not exclude them, whatever their situation. The hit rate on our BSL-interpreted screencasts has been small (around one percent of the overall hits) but still significant enough to be of value, I believe.

Figure 1: A BSL interpreted student screencast

The students were not involved in the interpreted versions; a professional interpreter was brought in several weeks after the screencasts were made. Although the students enjoyed seeing their work in this format, I have contemplated whether working alongside an interpreter might have added another useful dimension to the experience for the students. It might, perhaps, have given them an even greater appreciation of the impact that their screencasts might have, and might also have added a further element of academic reflection to the process.

In their academic placement reports, the students focused first on how they were able to flex their knowledge to re-purpose it for a different group of learners. They then explained how and why they designed their screencasts for this particular situation. This accounted for approximately one third of the report. They followed this by comparing the texts and issues covered in the screencasts with other texts on the module, moving into more familiar academic territory. Writing a report that incorporates both a reflection on screencasting and a wide-ranging comparative analysis with other material on the module is a challenge. However, the convenors and I felt that it would ensure that we do not receive reports that simply described the screencasts, which we felt could be a limitation of the scheme. This requirement allayed any concerns we had around the academic rigour of assessing this particular type of academic placement.

By the conclusion of each project the students have created a positive online presence for the future, displaying graduate attributes in a competitive professional marketplace. They have also engaged with screencast and presentation technology (most usually Prezi and Camtasia). Beyond this, applying their learning and creating original material in a public setting has led to noticeably more focused and intellectually more mature students:

> The report writing was very useful, as it built on my assessed essays. Instead of one continuous piece of writing, it was challenging to condense the most important points into sections and still maintain an overall argument. However, intellectually this led me to be more selective, building on my ability to edit properly and think about cutting analysis out selectively. (English Literature student.)

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

The success of this project could be measured by the number of times the screencasts have been viewed on YouTube: from that initial phase (2014-15) they have received over 5,700 hits on YouTube, or by the comments left by those viewers. This is gratifying, of course, and offers external, public facing validation of their work to our students. The comments on YouTube also demonstrate that the screencasts reached their primary target audience of 'A' level students.

Although this external impact could be taken as evidence of a successful partnership between students and academic in one of our principal aims – to reach and instruct those viewing the screencasts on YouTube – what it cannot demonstrate so well is the effect on the learning outcomes of these students.

However, it is clear from the feedback we received that students see themselves as more proficient learners as a result of this experience:

> I feel that producing the screencasts helped me to develop other professional skills, such as confidently delivering a scripted voiceover and editing it with software that is specifically suited to editing videos and soundtracks. (English Literature student.)

> I learned a lot about myself in how I learn and study best as well as how I best organise my own working deadlines and report writing – something I'd never done before. These are key wider skills that have been really helpful for me to learn and practise so early on. (English Literature with year abroad student.)

This was important to me because one of my aims was to try to create partnerships in which students moved away from focusing almost exclusively on subject- and topic-based learning aims – an ever present danger in modular degree programmes. I was pleased to see that this scheme helped students to recognise the value of developing an autonomous sense of self as a learner, with strengths and with challenges to overcome, regardless of what is being learnt. This learning partnership has achieved this successfully.

Students also come to see the benefit of a new way to express their learning. Creating screencasts for the first time is not an easy task for them, and their engagement with the module becomes intense as they try to recognise and then

articulate their learning in this new setting. Knowledge must be examined, weighed and then disseminated in a way that will benefit the YouTube audience; students have to move from being recipients of information to being active participants in the sharing of their knowledge.

Reflections on the project

Students on academic placements (both those creating screencasts and those engaged in discrete, external research projects) have developed meaningful partnerships with academics. By sitting side by side and debating the issues around and within a module, and then translating that experience into an output that engages with the wider world, students come to see that knowledge is not static and merely absorbed, but is there to be used. The module convenors, too, are challenged to consider their modules in this new light. They are sometimes surprised to see how relevant their specialist material is in an external, often commercial, setting.

Convenors can find it daunting to rise to the challenges of working with students in this way. No longer does the academic simply deliver a module, in full control of the material and in fairly strict control of the learning outcomes. The convenor is asked to consider a module from a new angle, as something that can be, at least in part, translated into a new activity and open to a much wider audience. Although not all students will choose to take up the option of an academic placement, those convenors with experience of the scheme have reported that they found the experience challenging, especially in how they measure success in assessment, but also refreshing.

'A Girl' by Michael Field: A screencast by Leonie Heath

Figure 2: A further example of a student screencast

For those students creating screencasts, I have learnt that they prefer to make the initial Prezi®, PowToon® or Videoscribe® presentation by themselves, after initial meetings with me and with the module convenor, but then use my office to add the soundtrack and create the final screencasts. This takes far longer than they expect, and I have developed a habit of leaving them alone for much of the time, then checking in on them occasionally. This approach seems to work well, and is more respectful of the partnership we have created, rather than watching them at work throughout the creation of the screencast.

I have also opted for offering open drop-in sessions, rather than more formal meetings, with a variety of colleagues (both academic and support staff members) for those students who are thinking about an academic placement. This approach allows us to match the pace of students, who might in the early stages want no more than a brief conversation about what they might do, and thereafter often prefer the chance to raise multiple quickly queries over several weeks, rather than being asked to a lengthy meeting.

Although I have been able to develop approaches such as this from the conversations I have had with both colleagues and students, it was a mistake not to introduce a more formal and fulsome feedback opportunity for everyone at the outset. For example, this feedback from students (taken from module evaluation sheets) clearly shows the challenges and benefits of a screencasting academic placement:

> Completing the academic report taught me how to gather and organise information independently, which in turn has helped me improve both personally and with my university work. (English Literature student.)
>
> This let me bring together what I have learnt academically and enhance my transferable skills. I…honed my existing skills and (it) also introduced me to a whole new range of skills that I would have never otherwise had the opportunity to learn. (Philosophy and English Literature student.)

However, it would have been of far more value if we had in place an evaluation system that allowed for a more in depth consideration of academic placements in particular.

I had initially expected to dedicate significantly more time to working with students on their screencasts, and on other academic placements projects, than turned out to be the case. In the early days of academic placements I followed what I recognise now was a standard academic's approach to a new scheme: I introduced failsafe systems, including regular, scheduled meetings with placement students, plenty of

paperwork to back up their aims and progress, and lengthy meetings with module convenors to ensure that the module learning outcomes were met in each case.

This approach was not conducive to the development of learning partnerships. Within the first year, I had recognised that the best way to make academic placements meet my original vision was to take a far more hands-off approach. All activities around academic placements are fully supported by members of the academic and support staff team, but, at every stage, students take the lead. This begins with taking the initiative in the first place (given that academic placements are not a compulsory element of our degree programmes), continues as they shape and secure their academic placement research project, and concludes with enabling them to structure their academic placement report in a way that they believe best allows them to represent the learning that has been achieved through the experience.

I have come to believe that being open to student initiative is the only way to create genuine learning partnerships between staff and students. It also offers, by happy coincidence, a huge saving on staff time, which can be dedicated to the more productive (and enjoyable) aspects of the scheme. These include working with students to explore what learning means to them, and what aspect of a module matters most to them, and how they could use and develop their expertise away from the classroom.

Future plans

I have now developed the scheme further by working with creative writing students. We offer several creative writing modules and I am keen to recognise this aspect of our degree through screencasting projects.

So, this year I worked, for example, with a student on our Creative Writing pathway who was studying the novel *Jane Eyre*. She encountered the work not on a creative writing module, but on a standard second year English Literature module entitled 'Writing, Gender, Identity'. She was keen to bring her creative writing skills to bear on her new understanding and appreciation of *Jane Eyre*, and so, as an academic placement within the module, she wrote a short play in response to the novel. She then reflected on her creative choices in a screencast. Rather than the standard assessed essay, she produced a report in which she considered both her play and her screencast, and how each reflected and enhanced her understanding of gender, identity and literature. This gave the student an opportunity to explore her creativity and also to share her work with a wider audience, thus enhancing her professional profile online whilst still an undergraduate.

As is so often the case with initiatives aimed at students, we find ourselves as academics changing in the process, almost without realising it. Seeing the impact of the screencasts, and the positive response from students, led directly to us creating short descriptive screencasts for each of our modules. These are also on our YouTube channel and we plan to use them in the coming year, alongside a suite of study skills screencasts, as part of the support we offer students.

This scheme has taught me about the power, and the limitations, of screencasting as a tool for engaging students. It has also shown me that 'partnership' is not synonymous with 'engagement'. In order to move from engaging with students on this project to working with them in a meaningful partnership, I have had to lead my colleagues in taking deliberate steps that allow space, time and a genuine sense of agency to our students. The scheme has been a useful springboard to inspire us as well as our students.

Related publications and resources

For presentations and screencasts: www.prezi.com

For animated screencasts: www.powtoon.com and http://www.videoscribe.co/

For more digital learning resources and ideas: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/

Jensen, K. & Bennet, L. (2016) Enhancing teaching and learning through dialogue: a student and staff partnership model. International Journal for Academic Development. Vol 21, Issue 1

Kolb, D. (2015). Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (2nd ed.). New Jersey, USA, Pearson Education, Inc.

Morris, C., Chikwa, G. (2014) Screencasts: How effective are they and how do students engage with them? *Active Learning in Higher Education*.15 (1)