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Project Report 2009-10 SCEPTrE Fellowship

Professional communication: a web-based resource

1. Background, aims and achievements

1.1 Background to the project

Good communication skills are an essential employability skill required from graduates. In a 2008 survey by the Learning and Skills Network, communication skills were ranked top of the list by industry decision makers (Martin et al. 2008). Despite this however, the National Employer Skills Survey (2007) identified communication skills as one of the most essential skill gaps.

The web-based resource that was developed for this project are specifically targeted at helping students develop communication skills during their professional training year, but can also be useful for professional training before and after placement.

1.2 Project aims

The aims of the project were as follows:
1) to develop a cross-disciplinary web-based resource on a number of aspects of professional communication skills
2) to pilot this resource as a basis for reflection on the professional placement year in the Department of Languages and Translation Studies
3) to make the resource available to other departments in FAHS and across the university, allowing them to embed professional communication into their curricula
4) to gain insights into the development of reflective skills and novices' development of professional communication skills
5) to share expertise on supporting the development of professional communication skills with other departments

The project contributes directly to the main tenets of SCEPTrE's vision to provide students with a 'complete education', to foster life-long and life-wide learning, to develop subject and professional knowledge and skills and to connect academic and professional development. Moreover, it relates directly to SCEPTrE's 2009 priority theme of "curriculum development".

1.3 Achievement of aims

Aim	Progress made	Work to be done
1. to develop a cross-disciplinary web-based resource on a number of aspects of professional communication skills	- attended placement debriefing sessions run by LTS and the International Office; read SCEPTrE placement stories and LTS placement reports - read relevant literature and searched recorded episodes of "The Apprentice" for relevant examples - completed writing of the core of the resource	- students and tutors in LTS (and possibly beyond) to be interviewed in summer/ autumn 2010 to gather material for case studies - case studies to be included in the resource, drawing on student experiences as reported by themselves or by placement tutors - additional section on 'practical' communication issues such as telephone skills, asking for help etc. to be written - work with technical team regarding design and hosting of resource

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1. to pilot this resource as a basis for reflection on the professional placement year in the Department of Languages and Translation Studies	• reflective tools piloted during placement preparation session in spring 2010 • resource available to 2009-10 LTS placement cohort for use on voluntary basis	• student evaluation of resource in autumn 2010 (questionnaire to returning LTS students only) • full implementation of resource into LTS professional training programme from 2010-11 • after departmental implementation (and potential wider rollout): student evaluation of revised version in autumn 2011 (questionnaires to all student users)
2. to gain insights into the development of reflective skills and novices' development of professional communication skills	• Designed questionnaire on the development of communication skills; questionnaire link e-mailed to placement students in FAHS and SoM (➔ Only 10 answers received)	• students and tutors in LTS (and possibly beyond) to be interviewed in summer/ autumn 2010 • questions on professional communication skills to be add to LTS placement supervisor assessment forms
3. to share expertise on supporting the development of professional communication skills with other departments (and beyond the university)	• SCEPTrE Seminar in September 2010 to disseminate resource within the university • Resource to be made available to other departments and expertise offered to other departments if required after completion of the resource in autumn 2010 • Write chapter for SCEPTrE e-booklet (autumn 2010)	• Explore possibilities to run workshops for students / staff on professional communication issues • Dissemination beyond the university by ➔ presentations at national and international conferences and workshops; possibilities to be explored ➔ papers in academic journals, e.g. Teaching in Higher Education / Studies in Higher Education

2. The resource

2.1 Guiding principles

Many guides and even academic textbooks on communication in professional settings tend to approach communication by offering quick-fix guidelines. For example, the 2008 book "Communication secrets" by Carolyn Boyes is structured along a set of rules (e.g. "practise your handshake", "use eye contact carefully"). The inherent problem of such guidance on communication that is it doesn't take contextual factors (participants, setting, participants' goals etc.) into account. Instead, rules for social interaction are described as non-negotiable and "given" entities. Moreover, users are not trained to look out for such factors and to approach situations of social interaction flexibly and reflectively. Therefore, this resource follows the following guiding principles:

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   1. *The resource must not offer quick fixes ("rules"), but encourage reflection.*
Research in Applied Linguistics has shown that communication is always contextually situated. Norms of social interaction, the goals of the encounter, speaker roles etc. are not something static and given, but negotiated during the encounter. Therefore, the resource aims to develop reflective practitioners (Schön 1983) rather than offering quick fixes ('rules') for social interaction.
According to Roger (1991), "the intent of reflection is to integrate the understanding gained into one's experience on order to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as to enhance one's overall effectiveness." (p. 41). The resource that I have designed therefore uses students' own placement experiences as point of departure for the reflective processes, supplemented by examples from popular TV shows such as 'The Apprentice'. Also taken into account and scrutinized under this reflective approach is the role of emotions in social interaction.

   2. *The resource should allow students to develop verbal and nonverbal strategies based on an assessment of social context*
The resource is based on the principles of interactional sociolinguistics (IS), which is concerned with how speakers create meaning in social interaction. It aims to develop students' awareness of how verbal and nonverbal strategies serve interlocutors as *contextualisation cues* (Gumperz 1999) for their interpretations of talk and ultimately, assessment of character. For example, fidgeting with arms and body would be interpreted as nervousness by most people.

A similar approach has been described by Jones & Stubbe (2004) for their consultancy work in the management field: "From early on, the LWP team stressed that there are 'no simple rules' for effective communication at work [...] and that strategies based on specific contexts are the key to effectiveness." (p. 189)

   3. *The resource needs to use students' placement experience as point of departure*
Rather than presenting the material from mainly theoretical perspectives, the resource will take students' real placement experiences as point of departure. Drawing on students' reports in placement reports and during placement debriefing sessions and from students' placement stories published by SCEPTrE, the resource uses actual student experiences to introduce each subsection of the resource. Moreover, those experiences are also the basis for some of the reflective exercises.

2.2 Content

As of July 9 2010, the resource is currently available under links below. Only a selected number of people have been given access so far (LTS placement team, Norman Jackson, FAHS e-learning team). Please note that some technical issues are currently being looked into (i.e. some videos are not working) and that the resource still requires extensive proofreading:
The resource consists of three distinct sections.

http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/ulearn/pc-resources/section-01/index.htm
http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/ulearn/pc-resources/section-02/index.htm
http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/ulearn/pc-resources/section-03/index.htm

Section 1 introduces students to how what they say and how they say it might be understood and interpreted by others. Communication is not simply about exchanging information. Rather, it is a two-way process in which two or more conversational partners negotiate their relationship through a number of signs, both verbal and nonverbal. Moreover, the section is also concerned with the role of emotions, the importance of attending to context, and the impact of emotions during social interactions. The section ends with an introduction to the communication skill students should strive to develop during the placement year and top tips on doing so. Reflective exercises, many

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of which use scenes from "The Apprentice" feature in this section, as are case studies based on student reports.

Section 2 focuses in particular on communication across cultures and languages. In intercultural communication, intercultural differences regarding ways of speaking and ways of doing this need to be considered, all of which may affect the way social interactions proceed. Moreover, issues regarding communication in a foreign language are also discussed. The section closes with case studies based on student reports.

Section 3 discusses a variety of issues and topics regarding communication in professional settings
  • Getting things done at work: scripts, jargon and register
  • Communicating with customers
  • Fostering relationships at work
  • Teamwork, collaboration and conflict
  • Written communication

Each of the subsections is illustrated with a quote by a placement student. Moreover, this section features a number of reflective exercises, based on episodes from "The Apprentice" as well as student reports.

Integrated within those sections are **three reflective tools:**
  • **Planning tool:** A worksheet allowing users to plan ahead for challenging social encounters, guiding them through the reflective process on the impact of their emotions and the social context.
  • **Evaluation tool:** A worksheet allowing users to self-evaluate their performance during a social encounter or evaluate others.
  • **Self-analysis tool:** A worksheet allowing users to evaluate their communication skills as a whole.

3. Plans for implementation, evaluation and dissemination

3.1 Implementation into LTS programmes

The resource will be integrated within the LTS professional training programme in the following ways:
  • **Publication on ULearn** (in a folder with further professional training resources), access given to all LTS students and tutors
  • **Resource and reflective tools made available to all LTS tutors** for use in a variety of modules (Level 1/3 Oral Skills Module, Level 2 Intercultural Communication, Level 3 Professional Communication)
  • **Placement preparation programme:**
    o **language-specific workshops on professional communication**, making use of the evaluation tool developed as part of the resource
    o Reflective tools to be used in preparation for and debriefing after **practice job interviews**
  o **Placement assessment:**
    o **Portfolio:** Students required to submit a "professional language" crib sheet as part of their placement preparation portfolio.
    o **Reflective log & placement report:** students required to use the resource as basis for their reflective log (during placement) and their placement report (post-placement

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3.2 Resource evaluation

As work on the resource is still ongoing, I have so far not yet received any feedback from students on the resource as a whole. However, a placement preparation workshop in my own department allowed me to get feedback on the three reflective tools featured within the resource.

Planning tool: The planning tool received an average rating of 4.3 (out of five). Students commented that the tool would let you consider elements that you would usually take for granted in a given situation and that it would make a situation more manageable to process. Students also liked the structure and the colours in the tool. Some problems with spacing were flagged up, which were addressed in the revised version of the tool.

Self-analysis tool: This tool received an average rating of 3.9 (out of five). Students found it simple to understand and commented that the tool makes you think about your strengths and weaknesses and what you need to improve. Students asked for improvements to the rating scale, which has been done by bringing it up to five boxes (always – often – sometimes – rarely – never).

Evaluation tool: This tool received an average rating of 3.7 (out of five). While students found the tool useful for coming up with solutions to problems in particular social encounters, they didn't like the original layout which spread over two pages, featuring space for writing comments. In the end, I decided to prioritise clarity of arrangement over allowing space for comments.

Further evaluation of the completed resource to start from autumn 2010:
- student evaluation of pilot version in autumn 2010 (questionnaire to returning LTS students)
- after departmental (and potentially wider) rollout: student evaluation of revised version in autumn 2011 (questionnaires to all student users)

3.3 Dissemination

The project and the resource will be presented in a SCEPTrE seminar in September 2010. It is also planned to write a SCEPTrE e-booklet chapter, but this may not be possible before autumn 2011.

Once the pilot version resource has been finished, I want to disseminate it further both within and beyond the University of Surrey. Possible forums for this purpose are conferences and workshops on higher education pedagogy, professional training and professional communication. I recently attended a conference in Brussels entitled "Languages in Business Education" which may be running again next year and which would provide a good forum to introduce the resource and discuss communication issues with an expert audience from across Europe. I am also investigating the possibility to write a paper for an A-rated higher education journal (Studies in Higher Education, Teaching in Higher Education).

I am happy to explore with SCEPTrE (and possibly CEAD) to explore possibilities of running further workshops for both students and staff on issues of professional communication.

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