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Enhancing Graduate Attributes: a Preliminary Research Study

Eric Bates

Dublin Institute of Technology, eric.bates@dit.ie

Peter Hinch

Dublin Institute of Technology, peter.hinch@dit.ie

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4 Enhancing graduate attributes: A preliminary research study

Eric Bates and Peter Hinch

School of Construction

Contact: eric.bates@dit.ie • peter.hinch@dit.ie

Abstract

The objective of this Teaching Fellowship research project was to establish whether graduate attributes should form part of student education within programmes offered by the Dublin Institute of Technology. This study was conducted during one semester and concentrated on one aspect of graduate attributes which were interview skills. Two videos were scripted, shot and edited that focused on interviews from the perspective of both the interviewer and the interviewee. These videos were showcased with lecturers whose feedback indicated that some improvements were required. Following those improvements the videos were shown to two student groups for feedback. The videos successfully provoked an awareness of the requirements in both situations and were well received. It is recommended that further research be carried out on developing materials and resources that focus on enhancing graduate attributes. These resources could be integrated into a dedicated module and embedded within programmes.

Key words: *graduate attributes, interview skills*

Introduction

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, commonly referred to as the Hunt Report, asks the question “what are the right skills for the graduates of 2015 and of 2030 and what mix of skills should we pursue as learning outcomes of higher education?” (Higher Education Strategy Group 2011: 35). The answer that is proposed calls for increased attention to be paid to core skills such as communications and team working skills (*ibid.*). International research also highlights the importance of communication skills for graduates, and indeed this is ranked first in a list of graduate attributes in a survey of 350 graduate employers in a recent Australian survey (Graduate Careers Australia 2013). Communications skills were also ranked third in research that sought to determine what were the most important skills new employers look for in new hires (Hart 2006). Thus, communications skills are a key part of the skills set of graduates.

Further, it has been pointed out that if graduates “understand what employers are looking for and work to develop the skills and attributes they value, graduates will have an edge on the competition” (CBI 2009: 6). Being aware that employers desire such skills should provide students with the impetus to develop these attributes.

The purpose of this research was to produce reusable resources that could be embedded within a communications module and used institute-wide. This could potentially lead to the development of a generic module that would be aimed at enhancing graduate attributes. After much discussion it was agreed that interview skills would be the focus of this research.

Interview skills are one of the key factors in gaining employment. It is common practice for an interviewee to be advised on the importance of non-verbal presentation as well as verbal presentation (Bolles 2008). Such non-verbal cues include the dress code and the sitting position. Indeed, in a meta-analysis on research carried out regarding interview assessments Barrick, Shaffer and DeGrassi (2009) found positive correlations between non-verbal behaviours and interviewer evaluations. This would appear to be common sense. Yet, some research would appear to be contradictory. Tsai, Huang and Yu (2012) found that non-verbal behaviour had no effect on interviewer evaluations. However, the authors themselves indicate that the different research designs may have contributed to the difference between their research and that of Barrick, Shaffer and DeGrassi (2009) and further suggest that Barrick et al. may not have been able to control for other applicant behaviour and, as a result, the findings may be closer than on first inspection.

Given the proliferation of social media and networks this research set out to produce a series of videos focusing on interview skills. It was expected that the videos produced could utilise social media in a positive way to disseminate the research to the target student cohort and thus maximise its impact and benefits.

Research Outline

The project plan had specific dates and deadlines that were put in place in order to produce a finished product by the end of the academic year. As such there were distinct phases throughout.

Phase 1: production

This phase involved the development and writing of a series of videos related to interviewing skills. The authors scripted two distinct videos. One video would demonstrate a well-prepared candidate and an ill-prepared interviewer (Video 1). The second video would demonstrate an ill-prepared candidate and a well-prepared interviewer (Video 2). The authors used personal digital video recorders

and shot the footage in the home of one of the authors. This footage was then edited through free movie editing software to produce the two separate videos.

It is important to note that the research was not trying to put together videos that could be held up as perfect examples of how to do an interview. Given the different requirements of employers it was felt that this would be too restrictive. Rather, the research set out to produce videos that would provoke debate and discussion among participants and students. Such discussions, it was hoped, would lead to a more enriching and participative experience for the students and staff alike. To help achieve this it was decided to incorporate a certain comedic element. This took the form of exaggeration that would perhaps not be typical of an interviewer or an interviewee.

Phase 2: staff workshops

Once the videos were edited a lunchtime workshop was run with lecturing staff. This workshop took place in a lecture room and used a large screen, digital projector and speakers. Before the videos were shown a briefing note was read. (Please see Appendix D.1 for the text.) After each video was shown, short questionnaire sheets were given out (see Appendix D.2). Discussions then took place where specific questions were put to the group (see Appendix D.3).

Results and Discussion

Feedback survey

During the staff workshops both videos were showcased. After each video was screened, a short two-question survey was given out (see Appendix D). This was carried out immediately after the videos finished before any discussions took place. It was important to capture the participant's initial reactions. After the questionnaires were gathered, a short focus group discussion took place with one of the authors leading the discussion and the second author acting as recorder. Ten participants took part in the workshops and for each questionnaire ten sheets were returned. To begin, the results from Video 1 Prepared Candidate will be discussed.

Question 1.

Question	Agree		Don't know		Disagree
	5	4	3	2	1
This video is a good idea.	80%		10%		10%

Table 4.1: Question 1 results

The overall consensus was that the video was a good idea with eight out of ten agreeing while one indicated disagreement and one also indicating a "Don't know". There was a comment box beneath each question and generally the responses were positive. Examples included "It will keep the students interested", "multimedia always works well in the class room". The participant that indicated "Don't know" wrote that "lecturers are expected to entertain rather than teach, I am not sure we should be doing this kind of thing". Interestingly the participant that disagreed wrote "this is not part of our job".

Question 2.

Question	Agree		Don't know		Disagree
	5	4	3	2	1
I would use such a video with my students.	40%		10%		50%

Table 4.2: Question 2 results

Four out of the ten participants indicated they would use such a video with their students. Comments included the following "I have thought of doing stuff like this myself but never got around to it" and "a selection of these videos would be perfect for my module". Despite the majority indicating in Question 1 that the video was a good idea it was surprising that so many of the participants would not actually use the video (50%). However, the comments section provided some elaboration which went some way to explaining the response rate. Comments from participants who would not use such a video included the following "I do not have time on my module" and "I do not use media like this" and perhaps most telling "students would expect me to have videos for every class". The participant who indicated indecisiveness wrote "I am not sure of the learning this would generate, I tend to be slightly sceptical of this kind of thing anyway".

Focus group discussion

This discussion took place after the questionnaires had been collected. The questions were put to the group by one of the authors while the other acted as scribe and recorder taking written notes. The first question put to the group was "What was good about the video?" An overwhelming reaction was the comedic element. The group identified the funny elements as a key point in keeping their attention.

The group was then asked "What was not so good about the video?" Once again there was an immediate overwhelming response that the videos were too long. Each video lasted approximately six minutes and the general agreement was that this may not hold the interest of students who "are raised on YouTube clips of 90 seconds" (participant 2). Following close behind this point was the quality of the video. Being shot on a home camera meant that the quality suffered and the audio was distinctly poor as radio microphones were not used in the production.

Lastly the group were asked "What would you do to improve the video?" Not surprisingly the quality of the picture and the audio were highlighted as well as the length of the video. The lead researcher prompted the group regarding the comedic element. There was a worry that too much comedy might be seen as too slapstick and devalue the aim of the video. The group disagreed with this point.

Phase 3: re-shoot

Given the overwhelming criticism of the quality of the videos it was decided to try improving the product. To this end, Roy Moore of the Telematic Facility in DIT was contacted and he agreed to become our technical advisor to help improve the quality of the videos. Roy has a mini-studio with high-grade equipment and an expert knowledge of what is involved in shooting, editing and finishing high quality video films. Over the course of several weeks the video scripts were edited and re-shot under Roy's supervision with the use of radio microphones and professional editing techniques. The end result was two streamlined high quality videos which were shorter in duration and vastly improved in sound quality. The next step in the research was to run student workshops in order to obtain feedback.

Student workshops

Ten students were recruited to take part in the student workshops. In order to ensure objectivity the students were from a course with which neither author had any contact. The ten students were split into two groups and shown either Video 1 or Video 2.

Video 1 group

The students were given a pre-video worksheet which asked "You are required to carry out an interview. Please list the factors to be considered in carrying out the interview." Five minutes were allotted for this task. The sheets were then collected and the video was shown. When the video was finished the students were given another blank worksheet and asked to fill it out once more to allow for additional comments.

Pre-video responses listed items such as dress code, eye contact, preparation in terms of the questions to be asked, to look and be professional.

Post-video responses listed items such as the importance of a handshake in making a good impression, being organised for the interview, being professional in terms of phone etiquette, information for interviewee in terms of signage, job specific questions, and professional conclusion to the interview.

Video 2 group

The second group of students were also given a pre-video worksheet which asked "You have been called for an interview. Please list the factors to be considered in attending the interview." Five minutes were allotted for this task. The sheets were then collected and the video was shown. When the video was finished the students were given another blank worksheet and asked to fill it out once more to allow for additional comments.

Pre-video responses from students included the following:

- The importance of dressing appropriately
- Carry out some background research on the company
- Bring references
- What I have to offer the company
- Stay positive, smile but don't grin.

Post video results included the following:

- Always switch off mobile phones
- Give a good handshake
- Correct posture during interview
- Have prepared questions
- Projection oneself positively
- Have a good attitude.

Conclusions

It is clear that the videos were very useful as a talking point and a means of discussion among the participants. Several items were brought to light that the students deemed to be helpful both in the preparation for being an interviewee and being an interviewer. The majority of lecturers also believed this to be a useful tool. It was clear that the videos must be of a good quality to use in the classroom.

Recommendations

1. Develop further material dedicated to specific themes relevant to graduate attributes. Such themes could include presentation skills, team working, problem solving and leadership skills.
2. Develop a full module focusing on enhancing graduate attributes and offer this as an elective module worth 5 ECTS. This module could become embedded within programmes leading to a focus on such generic skills being an integral part of any graduate's core competencies.

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