

The power of external stakeholders to enhance social and emotional learning in Higher Education

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Bringing real-world projects – or “live briefs” – into the classroom with the collaboration of external stakeholders can be challenging but, in the words of a student, can provide a valuable “bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application”. Live briefs with a wider social context can encourage emotional engagement and support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), enabling students to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to manage emotions, develop empathy, and build healthy identities (CASEL, 2023). Furthermore, emotionally engaging students as part of a learning experience can enhance wellbeing (Grové and Laletas, 2020; Edwards et al, 2019) and help develop emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2020).

Since 2016, I have taught a final year “Enterprise Systems Development” module for undergraduate Computing and Software Engineering students. The use of live briefs for this module was adopted as part of a HEFCE-funded research project (Chance et al, 2018; Rochon, 2022) which ran from 2016 to 2018. From 2018 onwards, I retained the student-staff-stakeholder partnership model, which includes a team-based report and presentation as summative assessments, delivering the module face-to-face for undergraduate students and online for degree apprentices.

In a student-staff partnership, it is advantageous for the tutor to act as a partner in learning, more than as a controller of learning. I therefore position myself as a member of student teams, proactively engaging in their instant messaging group chats (e.g., using Microsoft Teams) and joining team meetings held during class where “dialogue was only loosely set in

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advance but evolved through our findings and inputs”, which aligns with the essence of co-creation in the curriculum (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019) and social constructivism (Mcleod, 2019). Augmenting classroom collaboration with quasi-synchronous communication tools outside the classroom (e.g., instant messaging) can also enhance students’ sense of belonging and contribute to the “Social” aspect of SEL through a greater degree of connectedness that is not solely reliant on face-to-face interaction during scheduled classes. While healthy competition between teams is encouraged, inter-team knowledge sharing is facilitated during classroom sessions and the whole class is helped to ideate and co-create within the context of a real-world problem that engages them with societal issues at an emotional level. Each team member is encouraged to play to their strengths and one student stated they became “more aware that as an individual I can contribute in more than one way” to have a positive impact.

With the additional complexities of involving an external stakeholder, academic staff must maintain a learning environment that is physically, intellectually and emotionally safe (Thompson and Wheeler, 2008). While demonstrating authentic leadership, which contributes to psychological safety within the learning environment (Soares and Lopes, 2020), tutors can model appropriate communication and behaviour with stakeholders during classroom sessions and act as an intermediary by collating and relaying questions and feedback via email, as appropriate. Fundamentally, a partnership is where “all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together” (Harrington et al, 2014) and external stakeholders need to be aligned with this. When students see stakeholders’ “patience and readiness to address our questions”, it is one factor in demonstrating their commitment to the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al, 2014) within the partnership.

While some of the business-focused live briefs over the years have proven worthwhile, I believe that live briefs with a significant social or civic focus can be of greater pedagogical value, as underpinned by a student’s comment that “being emotionally invested motivated me to invest more of my personal time reading, researching and trying to find a solution.” Students also voiced “a deeper commitment to delivering high-quality outcomes for

clients”, “a sense of pride and ownership” in the final deliverables, and a fortification of “my commitment to using technology as a [means] for social improvement.”

At the time of writing, the module is running for the eleventh time with a live brief looking at ways to alleviate food and hygiene poverty through digital mapping technology, in collaboration with our university’s Head of Civic Engagement and local charitable organisations. A previous example was a live brief presented by a GP focussed on exploring how to enhance communication between private healthcare patients and private clinics via digital technology. It is a privilege to work alongside student teams and external stakeholders on projects aiming to make a positive human impact (Oades et al, 2014) and I would warmly encourage colleagues to explore opportunities to work with stakeholders on projects to help engage students socially and emotionally.

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