

Encouraging Learner Autonomy through Small, Self-selected Research Projects

Using micro-research to inspire students and develop essential skills

The aim

History students take a module in the second semester of their first year called 'Making History 2'. This module looks at how the public interact with history, with the aim of showing students the differences between producing work for an academic audience and for the general public through undertaking a piece of independent research. Prior to 2012, this module provided students with a choice of ten possible public history projects to investigate and was assessed as a short presentation and portfolio of work. The students typically did not like being restricted to one of the set projects as they felt they didn't fit with the rest of their course. Therefore, in 2012, the tutors sought an alternative approach that would increase student engagement and assist them in seeing the links between this module and the rest of their course.

Benefits

- **Students feel more ownership of their project because they choose the topic**
- **Presenting the same work for different audiences helps the students develop different types of communication skills**
- **Students feel like practitioners/researchers rather than passive consumers**

The approach

The tutors decided to redesign the module to focus on independent research, with the restriction to a choice of ten public history projects replaced with students being able to choose their own research topics, bound by a few clear criteria. This included date range, geographical scope of the research, and an emphasis on under-researched topics. The presentation element was replaced with the production of a poster for display and discussion at a public exhibition; and some teaching sessions were added to cover employability issues, the development of transferable skills and how to articulate their skills to employers.

A number of optional trips were organised for students, including a guided walk around Sheffield, trips to Weston Park and Kelham Island museums, and one to demonstrate how to use the Sheffield Archives. These trips were important because they helped provide context, inspiration and skills development for the students. Students also commented on the building of a course identity and developing friendships with course colleagues and tutors from the visits.

The students were given a poster template to help them get started with using Microsoft Publisher and there were two workshops in IT rooms to give them some dedicated time to create the poster. The students were typically able to support each other in using the software, meaning the tutors had very few technical issues to resolve. The final poster was submitted to the tutors, who made sure that it was printed and ready for the exhibition.

A public exhibition of the posters was held at the university over an afternoon, and prizes for the three best posters were awarded by a local historian. While the posters were not formally assessed, they were an important part of the supporting material for the assessed portfolio. This included a critique of public history, an academic research essay presenting their findings, a reflective critique of their skills development, and a primary source review.

The outcome

Students commented that undertaking a small research project so early in the course helped them develop skills important for the entire course, and made them feel like historians rather than history students. This greatly challenged the students, who typically came straight from doing 'A' levels where their work is completely directed by their teacher, and they responded by taking ownership of their work because they were able to choose a topic of personal interest. Some students were so inspired by their chosen topic that they later used it as the basis for their final dissertation.

While members of the public who attended the event rated the posters, and students' ability to articulate their findings, very highly, some students stated that they did not put as much effort into the poster as they would have done if there had been marks directly associated with it.

The tutors feel that the focused, highly structured start to the module may be a factor in the level of engagement from the students. The students were eased through the process of investigating their chosen topic and creating their poster in such a way that what could have seemed a daunting task was broken down into smaller, manageable steps.

Profile

Tutor name:

Chris Corker &
Sarah Holland

Faculty:

Development & Society

Size of cohort:

Large (70-150 students)

Technologies used:

Microsoft Publisher

If you would like your practice captured and shared in a similar case study, please contact Brian Irwin within Quality Enhancement and Student Success.

Future development

The module is being moved to semester 1, which will mean that the poster project will be one of the first tasks undertaken by students when they start the course and so will be a good introduction to both the city and the resources that are available to help them during their course.

The tutors would also like to investigate:

- moving the exhibition to a location with more potential for participation by the public; and
- whether adding a small amount of marks to the posters will affect students' motivation

Recommendations

- Be supportive and structure interactions to keep students focused on the task
- Have reasonable expectations of the students based on their level
- Build and maintain student motivation throughout the process
- Use the term 'workshops' rather than 'seminars' to stress that the students will be actively participating