

Encouraging 'Rehearsal for Life' through cross-disciplinary role-play

Using the skills and experience of Performance students to support authentic simulated practice for Law students

The aim

Simulated practice, such as mooting and law clinics, is a major component of the Sheffield Hallam Law degree. However, these are generally only available in the final stages of the degree and it was felt that an opportunity to take part earlier in the degree would be of significant benefit to the students.

Benefits

- Provides opportunities to develop employability skills in a realistic setting
- Expertise from different disciplines leads to an improved learning experience
- Students gain experience of cross-disciplinary working

The approach

A new, core module, Clinical Legal Education, was created at level five with the intention of providing the students with the experience of working on a case within a simulated law firm environment. A similar module at the University of Northumbria used role-play with professional actors to set the scene for the simulated activity; however, the Law tutors at Sheffield Hallam University felt that there was the potential to involve students from other courses instead and, by doing so, use the activity as a learning opportunity for two groups of students simultaneously.

Funding was secured to pay students to act as clients for the Law students and the three stream leaders of the module wrote a scenario and script for each of their specialisms (Civil, Criminal, and Family Law). The opportunity was advertised to level 6 Performance students in the Department of Humanities, with particular emphasis placed on the employability benefits of taking part, resulting in more students expressing a wish to be involved than there were places available.

The selected Performance students attended a specific training session to discuss their role, to help ensure as consistent an experience as possible for the Law students within each of those streams. This training included how to respond to particular questions from the Law students and when to divulge specific pieces of information. While this was mainly a training session for the students, during the course of the session refinements were made to the three scripts based on the input of the students. The students were each assigned to, and learned the script for, one of the specialisms.

Simulated law firms of approximately ten students were created, and students (either working in pairs or individually depending upon the numbers within each group) held an assessed client interview with a Performance student who played the role of their client. The scripts ensured that the information received by the Law students during the interview was as standardised as possible, yet there was still scope within the script for some flexibility by the student 'in-role'. The simulation continued after the interviews through written correspondence. However, the tutors, working behind the scenes, took on the role of client after the initial interviews, for example, by drafting correspondence from the client and producing supporting evidence such as receipts and photographs for the client's case.

The outcome

The Law students initially found the activity quite daunting, partly due to it beginning within two weeks of the start of the year, yet they engaged completely in the process and found the whole exercise stimulating and a realistic learning experience. The Law students were encouraged to include the activity on their CVs when applying for placements and training contracts with law firms, with one student attributing the training contract she secured directly to the experience she gained on the module.

The project has provided good employability experience for the Performance students too. Many of them will go on to be self-employed and this experience developed skills such as attending meetings with clients and submitting invoices. Many organisations make use of role-playing as part of staff training and the experience that the students gained through this process is invaluable for their CVs. In addition, the students were also able to tie this work into one of their Arts in the Community module assessments, and one student who graduated with a First Class Degree used the experience in her dissertation. The students were very engaged in the process and, during the training session, offered suggestions on possible changes to the script that would make the activity more realistic.

The activity was beneficial for both sets of students and provided a good introduction to similar activities in other parts of each course. Students and staff were all highly motivated and excited by the activity, leading to better engagement in the process. The realism of the role-play activity required the Law stream leaders to be highly creative and resourceful when they took over the role of the client, including, for example, sourcing x-ray and environmental photographs at the request of the Law students working on 'their' case.

Profile

Tutor names:

Jill Dickinson, Law & Ashley Barnes, Performance

Faculty:

Development & Society

Size of cohort:

Very Large (150+ students)

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 tutors have run the activity for the past 2 years and funding to continue has been secured. The tutors have also worked together to identify some changes that should improve the process. In order to reduce the risk of a Performance student being unable to attend one of the role-play sessions, the tutors feel that increasing the number of students involved and having them all learn the three scripts will mean that there is extra capacity to cover contingencies. They also intend to make the benefits to the Performance students more obvious by stressing that they can use the experience in their reflections on their learning. The tutors also believe that both groups of students would benefit by having the 'clients' return for a further interview later in the process, though this may be difficult to arrange due to the Performance students' schedules.

Recommendations

The tutors suggest that anyone interested in trying this approach be:

- realistic about the needs and requirements of both sets of students -timetable clashes are inevitable
- prepared to work in collaboration with tutors and students from other disciplines and to use their expertise
- able to invest the necessary time in ensuring that the experience is as realistic as possible for the students