

Good Practice in Teaching Podcast

Episode 9, Ali Owrak – Assessment for Employability

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BB: Welcome to this latest podcast in our series Good Practice in Teaching. I'll be talking to Ali Owrak, Senior Lecturer at the Alliance Manchester Business School. Ali talks about developing Assessment focused on employability.

Hi Ali, thanks for talking to me today. So, can you tell me a bit more about the work you've been doing re-designing your assessments with a view to enhancing the employability skills that your students develop?

AO: Thanks very much for having me on here today to talk about our experiences. What we decided to do. For example, the first year the students coming in from their A-levels or equivalent and they've been examined, examined, and examined. They've gone through the education system in the UK or wherever they may be. And a lot of it is down to lack of group work. So they write a lot of essays or the doing they take a lot of exams. So what I say to them is that, when they come to our program, especially in the first year, we're not really here to measure them. We already know they're good because they got the grades to get in.

So we're more concerned about developing them. And yes, they will be assessed. And yes, there will be a mark at the end of it.

But our focus really in the first year is to try to get them in the mindset of what it's like to be a student and how our care for them is to develop them.

So what we did was we took out all exams within the first year of the program. We did toy around as well, which was quite interesting, with that idea of not having any assessment. Just having formative assessment in the first year. And we put that to the students and they did reject that, quite adamantly. They said no, we want a grade, it's really important that we get a grade. So that kind of went out the window.

It was one of the ideas that was flagged by some students, but then the overall body said no.

So one of the things we did was we got rid of exams and we made we made the assessment kind-of linked across all units.

So that there's a right consistency, mix of individual work and some on our more technical units and on our softer units we've got group work. So we allow them to work together and learn by working together. And then, what we've done as well is we've introduced formative assessment in all the units. So, it's that concept, and idea that

we're not here just to measure you at the End by giving you a task to do and then just seeing how well you do it.

We're actually here, especially in your first years to say, right, we're going to give you a go at this and then we're going to tell you where you went wrong. And then we're going to try it again and try it again.

And admittedly is more work for the academic but we try to do it in such a way where we're not marking huge amounts of essays. And so on there's different ways to, I guess to, to get round that. So we found a lot of ways of doing that.

So as an example of that, I would say when we're teaching them on how to write essays on our academic advising program, we're not saying, you know, write two 1500 words essays and then do a final one at the end for your summative.

We say, you know, present to us your structure and your thinking around it, you know, a few hundred words here and there, every now and again, and then they're getting the feedback on that and the building their confidence. And we do it in small groups as well.

BB: I guess you're building that kind of relationship between the academic and the student from that really early stage where it's not that relationship of an examiner and somebody been examined. It's more of that kind-of collaborative approach about learning that that you really trying to get, which sounds great.

So for assessment, we aligned our assessment with employers. So we bring employees in, we write case studies with the company, so when students are taking their assessment projects, they kind of see the value because they believe that this is, you know, this is a real world case study, this is a real world problem. We've got employees in the room who are pitching it as a real world problem and the students are then able to work on those.

So, we've got essentially aligned all our units with employers. So it's not just focusing on the student transition, but also their development and employability skills.

So our assessment isn't just assessment for assessment sakes, to get an understanding of where they are, how well they've done on the topic area. It's also got this extra depth of, it allows them to be employable because it's directly linked to the skill sets that employees in that area are looking for.

BB: Can you given set an example maybe of one of those kinds of Assessments?

Yeah, for so for example, we had a course unit that I inherited when I arrived in 2013. I remember it was a one page document that just basically said right students you're in a group, you're looking at making some changes to a petrol station about what IT equipment you'd introduce. And the petrol station was just a made-up one, somewhere in Manchester.

And then at the end of it, they had to come back, write a big report on it and then present as well, and also have an exam. So they had quite a lot of a lot of work around that.

So the first things I did with that, I changed it. It was a course unit that goes along two semesters. So what we did was, we took that idea of, okay, let's go with the case. I went and worked with three different companies. I wrote three different case studies with their support.

And then we took away the exam and we said, right, so for the first semester, we want them to learn these different models that's applied in Industry.

So the case study was with Ford motor company and they helped me develop it. So they come in, they pitch the case study that I've developed and it's a real life project that they're working on.

And then the students feel like they're working as consultants for this organization, they go away and do the work, and they come back and they, they deliver a report to them. And then, in the second semester of it, we then work with two other companies on some of the different models.

So, in the same scenario, we've got Vodafone, Barclays and we've had different companies, such as Shell come over the years.

And again, I write the case study with the company. They come and they pitch it. And the students really buy into this idea that they working for these organizations and get access to them. And they're delivering, the projects mean something and they realize as well, that the skills that they're using to deliver the output. It's very much aligned with the skill set that's needed and required by those organizations, when they employ people.

BB; Absolutely. And is it easy to get those organizations involved in this.

It has taken me a number of years to build up my portfolio of companies, so right now work with around 30 companies. I guess at first, I started off with one and two, and then I've made the effort to go and meet companies and contact them and build relationships.

So I run a biennial showcase for the programme. We run it in December and we've run one in May, at the end of each semester, and we bring lots of companies, there's usually about fifteen employers we'll bring in and the students pitch their work, for certain modules to these employers, so we have a bit of networking. So the day starts off with the students presenting their Works often in, you know, Dragons Den style to these employees. And then in the second part of the day, we get them to network with the employers.

And then also what we do is we have these Grand showcase finals where the best teams present in front of everybody. So the other students get to see what the standard is as well. And they get to basically build these relationships with employers, over the three or four years that they are with us. And it allows our employability success, which has been at hundred percent for the last three or four years. And it's quite easy then, because the employees are getting massive benefit because they're getting access to the best students in the country by coming to us. The students are really upping their game because they know it matters and it matters greatly for them to network and become professional really early on. And it's a win-win for everybody.

BB: Sounds amazing. I was I was about to say, has it increased your employability scores, but obviously it has, because I can imagine, you know, you can really imagine why that would increase your student satisfaction in it, but it's amazing that, you know, you've got such great employability scores. So yeah, really fascinating.

AO: What's happened over the years as well. I started off with contacting employers, people I didn't really know. But because of the success of getting the students in those companies, it's now my alumni from, you know, five years ago that are coming back. And they're leading some groups and they've got access and then they can open up more doors for me.

So, it's been wonderful because now when I've got students who are looking for industrial placement or for a graduate scheme and I say, okay, I'm interested in this company, who do I contact. And I say, okay, why don't you contact these four people because they were with us and they've got access to that network. And off they go and they get, I guess they get the support they need to apply for those roles.

BB: Thanks so much Ali for talking to me today. It's been so great to hear about the work you've been doing in this area.