

A Triple Win: Linking Students, Academics, and External Organisations to Provide Real-World Learning Experiences with Real-World Benefits

Authors : Anne E. Goodenough

Abstract : Students often learn best 'on the job' through holistic real-world projects. They need real-world experiences to make classroom learning applicable and to increase their employability. Academics typically value working on projects where new knowledge is created and have a genuine desire to help students engage with learning and develop new skills. They might also have institutional pressure to enhance student engagement, retention, and satisfaction. External organizations - especially non-governmental bodies, charities, and small enterprises - often have fundamental and pressing questions, but lack the manpower and academic expertise to answer them effectively. They might also be on the lookout for talented potential employees. This study examines ways in which these diverse requirements can be met simultaneously by creating three-way projects that provide excellent academic and real-world outcomes for all involved. It studied a range of innovative projects across natural sciences (biology, ecology, physical geography and social sciences (human geography, sociology, criminology, and community engagement) to establish how to best harness the potential of this powerful approach. Focal collaborations included: (1) development of practitioner-linked modules; (2) frameworks where students collected/analyzed data for link organizations in research methods modules; (3) placement-based internships and dissertations; and (4) immersive fieldwork projects in novel locations to allow students engage first-hand with contemporary issues as diverse as rhino poaching in South Africa, segregation in Ireland, and gun crime in Florida. Although there was no 'magic formula' for success, the approach was found to work best when small projects were developed that were achievable in a short time-frame, both to tie into modular curricula and meet the immediacy expectations of many link organizations. Bigger projects were found to work well in some cases, especially when they were essentially a series of linked smaller projects, either running concurrently or successively with each building on previous work. Opportunities were maximized when there were tangible benefits to the link organization as this generally increased organization investment in the project and motivated students too. The importance of finding the right approach for a given project was found to be key: it was vital to ensure that something that could work effectively as an independent research project for one student, for example, was not shoehorned into being a project for multiple students within a taught module. In general, students were very positive about collaboration projects. They identified benefits to confidence, time-keeping and communication, as well as conveying their enthusiasm when their work was of benefit to the wider community. Several students have gone on to do further work with the link organization in a voluntary capacity or as paid staff, or used the experiences to help them break into the ever-more competitive job market in other ways. Although this approach involves a substantial time investment, especially from academics, the benefits can be profound. The approach has strong potential to engage students, help retention, improve student satisfaction, and teach new skills; keep the knowledge of academics fresh and current; and provide valuable tangible benefits for link organizations: a real triple win.

Keywords : authentic learning, curriculum development, effective education, employability, higher education, innovative pedagogy, link organizations, student experience

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