

Exploring teaching CV writing as a space for students and practitioners to reflect, assess and grow in preparation for work placement

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Abstract

This paper explores an integrative pedagogical experiment designed to engage students in making connections across their lives, studies and employment through the process of CV writing as part of a pre-placement module. In order to investigate whether the CV could be used as an integrative learning tool, a case study was carried out in a second year pre-placement module in the BSc Finance degree in University College Cork. It was found that students viewed CV writing as a positive experience in spite of its intensity and focus on self-awareness and that the process of writing a CV was a welcome reflective space for students to assess and re-assess their skills, career choices and connections between the different parts of their lives.

Key words

Integrative Learning, reflection engage, employability, CV, pre-placement

1.0 Introduction

My role as work placement manager for the College of Business and Law in University College Cork tasks me with ‘assisting students to obtain a relevant work placement in industry’.

This practice paper investigates how to design the environment to make students more ‘work ready’ for the competitive recruitment process to secure a work placement. My question was: *‘How can I assist my students to make meaningful connections to secure the work placements they so covet?’* The curriculum vitae (CV) are the entry document to the recruitment and selection process and this is where I chose to focus my attention.

My context for my investigation into using the CV as an Integrative Learning tool takes place in the second year pre-placement module in the BSc Finance which I co-teach with an academic colleague. Analysis of my contribution to this module through a course portfolio in 2011/2012 identified significant gaps and disconnects in how I taught CV writing. Initial and guided performances of understanding from the Teaching for Understanding Framework (Blythe 1997) were missing from the structure of the CV writing unit, student feedback demonstrated a disconnect with my contribution to the module and employer’s feedback of students’ performances in interviews was that students were not making connections between their learning in university and learning outside of college.

2.0 The Trail of Integrative Learning, Work Placement and the CV in the literature

Integrative Learning is described as follows; ‘...the student’s capacity for meaning-making, her cultivation of skills and abilities to make coherent connections’ (Gale, 2006, p.2) that is really important. Intentionality is key and is at the very centre of teaching and learning. It is, as Huber and Hutchings (2004), argue something

that all students should be helped to develop as key to integrating their learning. Integrative Learning is particularly relevant in today's world of the twenty-first-century learner. Information is flooding around our students, technologies are changing at an incredible pace, transforming knowledge practices and students need the capacities and skills to enable them to function in this workplace (Huber and Hutchings, 2004, p.2). The world has seen a change in the concept of the career with 'boundaryless' careers emphasising maintaining one's employability through lifelong learning and career self-management (Inkson, 2006 cited in Clarke, 2009, p.9).

Huber et al (2007) note that experiential strategies such as service learning, internships or work placement as we call it in UCC, 'invite students to make connections between course work and community, theory and practice '(p.2). These strategies acknowledge the need for space for reflection and disclosure as well as 'intellectual dexterity on the part of the teacher and student' (Huber et al., 2007, p. 2). Effectiveness of learning from experience is widely considered to hinge on the act of critical reflection on this experience (Keating, 2006, p.19). Moon recommends providing 'space and opportunities for reflection and evaluation of learning experiences' (Moon, 2004, p.7). Billet argues that to secure the 'educational worth of these experiences, particular curriculum and pedagogical responses are needed prior to, during and after students engagement in practice-based experience' (Billet, 2009, p. 829). CV writing in pre-placement preparation is a vital space for students to identify and reflect on previous learning experiences and to consider future development and learning opportunities.

The CV is widely discussed in both popular and scholarly publications (William, 2000, Nelson Bolles, 2007). However, it is not just enough to highlight employer-specific employability skills on the CV. Evidence of these skills is sought in a deeper reading of the CV and will be explored later in the interview. Furnish (2012) re-conceptualises the CV as a process; 'the process of constructing a CV is an opportunity to engage... in an exploration of life goals, achievements, education, skills and potential barriers...' (p. 2). Wang and Yorks (2012) consider the CV as an opportunity to engage in reflective practice with 'many stories embedded behind the paper', arguing there is a need for pedagogical practices that bring 'self-images into the learning environment so students can be reflective on how they are in relationship with their academic work and career choices' (Wang and York, 2012, p. 158). Cv Writing can be considered as a space therefore for students to fully assess and develop that self-image. Therefore, the CV is not just a technical document and my interest in the CV is not as a technical document.

3.0 The Case Study

In 2012 the CV writing section of the pre-placement module was radically overhauled. An introductory performance was created in the form of a self-assessment, strengths-based questionnaire, used not only to

catalogue individual students' strengths but also to introduce students to terminology for the CV itself. Peer discussion of students' strengths following completion of the questionnaire was aimed at providing students with opportunities to benchmark their skills and experiences against other students.

The guided performance in CV writing was in the form of a recruitment and selection exercise called *One From Three*. The aim of this performance was to evaluate in teams, three CVs and to propose to interview one candidate based on a skills match against the job specification. This exercise was expanded to allow students in their teams to write the CVs, later assessed by peer groups, to pick one candidate. Teams were assisted in the CV writing by class notes and discussion. Cvs were collated and distributed to different teams. The second part of the exercise involved students taking on the role of employer to set the criteria for the selection of the candidate. In the last part of the exercise, teams assessed CVs written by peer groups against their criteria.

Teams differed in terms of selection criteria, even though the job specification was the same. Comments such as '*we needed the graduate to have a second class honours degree*', '*we requested excellent communication skills and presentation skills*' emerged in the team debriefs. Reflections such as these demonstrated teams applying real-world recruitment criteria to the exercise. Feedback on what candidates were selected allowed for peer learning opportunities. Comments such as '*poor detail on CV*', '*untidy*', '*well written*' reinforced key concepts of CV writing.

Finally, the last stage in CV writing was the CV tutorial and critique class. Students were asked to bring a copy of their CV with them to the class following a short tutorial on the technical aspects of CV writing. The class involved a number of self and peer learning opportunities. An example of a poor CV was shown and its short comings were discussed. Students were shown the rubric used to mark the CV and were asked to grade their own CV against this rubric. Finally, students passed their CV to a neighbour for feedback on their document.

4.0 Analysis

Analysis of data collected demonstrated a number of key points in relation to the students' views of the CV. This data was collected through a feedback questionnaire at the end of the module, through Classroom Assessment Techniques (CAT) (Angelo & Cross, 1988) (The Muddiest Point and Mrs Potters' Questions) during the recruitment exercise, and through semi-structured interviews with students and employers.

- (1) The CV was viewed as a unique document, unique to the writer, demonstrating the writer's personality and character. One comment shows this clearly '*shows I am driven and hard-working*' (student interview).

- (2) The CV was viewed as an external document, a document that links the world of work to the academic world. One student comments in the questionnaire '[the CV] *shows potential employers you are the best person for the job*'.
- (3) Student quotes demonstrated that the CV was more than a mechanical document; there was a need to write with intent and with more depth. One student reflects '*it is what differentiates you ... which is why it is important*'
- (4) Evidence also seemed to point to the fact that some students engaged in deeper, more reflective process during the CV writing, as well as contemplating the more technical issues of CV writing. On the technical side, a student remarked on learning about '*using reverse chronological order*', while another with deeper insight remarked '*gave us an insight into how to give the best impression*'.

5.0 An opportunity for the practitioner to listen to the student's voice and reflect on recent changes in how the CV Writing section of the module was taught

Overall data collection provided evidence of views on CV writing that were tangible and allowed for a strong foundation to continue to research the effectiveness of CV writing for the purposes of placement.

Students used the aforementioned CAT exercises and questionnaires as opportunities to ask questions that were not asked in class. Some questions were in relation to the recruitment process for placement: '*just interested about what you do in regards to references from previous employers*'. Capturing feedback on the module seemed to be a safe place to question elements of the placement process and an important space for students to provide feedback and to reflect. Students also voiced their opinions on how they thought things could be done better as part of their feedback: '*Maybe give hand-outs of good and bad CVs*' or '*If we saw CVs of previous placement students and were told why in particular this one stood out*'. Overall the case study research was a wonderful opportunity to explore both students' and employers' perceptions of the CV. I was happy to see that students viewed CV writing as largely a positive exercise in spite of its intensity and focus on self-awareness.

There are still a number of areas, however, where students find it difficult to make those connections. One area that arose was difficulty in extrapolating skills in their spare time or hobbies. Some students found it hard to see the relevance of their part time work experience in a non-relevant job such as bar work or shop assistant work. Pre-CV writing exercises to further allow for reflection and extrapolation of skills in part time work is essential.

Finally, an area of continued work for me is trying to convert that great CV writer in to a confident interviewee. The data taken from grades of CVs and benchmarking against numbers of interviews undertaken (2012 2013)

to secure a placement is interesting. Analysis of 7 students who obtained more than 15 out of 20 marks in the CV grade showed that 4 students completed one interview for placement, 2 students completed two interviews and one student completed 5 interviews before securing the placement. This data demonstrates that a strong mark in CV writing does not always signify a strong interviewee. The trend has continued in this current year with students showing some sign of better interview skills, while other students still struggle in spite of that strong CV therefore work still has to be done on verbalising the CV.

Placement Period	One Interview	Two Interviews	3+ Interviews
July to December 2015 100% of cohort scored between 15 and 20 marks in Cv Writing	12 students	2 students	1 student Cv score was 20/20
January to June 2015 78% of cohort scored between 15 and 20 marks in Cv Writing	16 students	4 students	3 students One of whom scored 6/20 in Cv Writing

Table 5.1 Data gathered from Annual Placement reports

6.0 Conclusions and Future Work

My research into CV writing has allowed me be more intentional about my teaching and has allowed me to see that learning has been positive for students in some areas, while not in others. CV writing is more than completing a template to input information. The learning space must be designed to support integrative learning for students through moments of reflection and reflective representation embodied in the CV. Students still struggle with differentiating excellent from average CVs .The introduction of an exercise involving transforming an average CV into an excellent one will be piloted this year in the module. Also, self-assessment could be used more by allowing the students to grade themselves and have that grade be accepted, if close, to my mark. Continued work needs to be done to assist students to verbalise the CVs to ace that interview! By continually analysing the student voice how I teach CV writing will always be shape shifting!

It was interesting to see employers' expectations for the document as well, as a lens into how the student links their discipline, work experience and hobbies to a career in the potential employer's sector. I believe that all students would benefit from using the process of CV writing as a space to explore self -awareness and evaluate their skills in order to be better learners in the work place. CV writing in this context is a learning tool that will be called on many times in an individual's life to re-evaluate learning experiences and learning opportunities.

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