

Learning Through Work Reflective Account of my SCEPTRe & CoLab experiences

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RUBRIC

The reflective account provides an opportunity for you to bring together the learning you have gained through your work experience. The focus is on things that you have learnt that you believe will be useful to you when you enter your chosen professional field and more generally what you consider to be useful skills that will make you employable or self-employable. We are looking for a coherent account of about 3 sides A4 (up to 2000 words, single space Arial 11pt). We do not want a checklist of responses to the questions.

1. CONTEXT:

Description of the work you have undertaken, your responsibilities and the organization (about 500 words)

Organisation

- Who were you working for? What does the organization do?
- What sort of work were you doing? / What were your responsibilities?
- What sort of people did you work with? (colleagues, clients, customers)
- How was the work organised? What did you learn about being part of an organisation?
- What were the main challenges you encountered and why?
- What sort of problems/issues did you encounter and how did you overcome them?

Approximate amount of time (hrs) spent in the work environment

2. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: (up to 1000 words)

a) Please complete the skills and experiences checklist (4 below)

b) What were the most important things you learnt and developed? Relate your development to the capability statement. Be comprehensive and give examples of specific experiences/situations through which you learnt these things. You can draw directly from your reflective diary/blog.

Prompts – these relate to the capability and values statement underpinning the Certificate

Managing and evaluating my own development

Being able to deal with situations, solve problems, work with challenge and take advantage of opportunity

Being able to find out what you need to know to do what you need to do

Being creative and enterprising

Being a good communicator

Being able to work with and lead others (including working with clients and customers)

Behaving ethically and with social responsibility

Other areas for personal development that are important to my role me, and which are not included in the above

3. BEING AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL? (up to 500 words)

What does it mean to be an effective professional, and how have your views been shaped by this work experience?

Illustrate your account with specific examples of situations where you felt you behaved in a professional way or examples when you realized you were not able to perform in a manner that you believe was appropriate (learning from experiences that were not successful is as important as learning from situations that are).

4. SKILLS & EXPERIENCES CHECKLIST

Please indicate with a ✓ the experiences and skills and personal development you actually gained and add comments to explain

1. ORGANISATION

SCEPTRe is one of 74 Centres for Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CETLs) in England. The Centres are being formed around proven excellence in education and training. SCEPTRe's purpose is to build on the existing excellence in professional education and training at the University of Surrey and develop an enquiry-led approach to learning for students. The ultimate aim is to improve students' experiences of learning and their development as engaged and creative learners so that they are better prepared for work in their chosen fields.

www.surrey.ac.uk/sceptre

My key responsibilities while I've been at SCEPTRe include:

Practical and Technical

- Setting up laptops and filming events.
- Editing filmed footage and producing various products such as podcasts.
- Sound record activities.
- Running and managing SCEPTRe's 2 video conferencing systems¹.
- Building and maintaining SCEPTRe's various websites.
- Provide technical support when to the SCEPTRe team and fellows.
- Maintaining all of SCEPTRe's technical equipment.
- Manage and maintain SCEPTRe's wiki's.
- Advise SCEPTRe team, students and staff on various technologies.
- Advise where appropriate alternative technology solutions.
- Implement SCEPTRe's backup policy².

Organisational

- Co-ordinate, manage and help develop the CoLab team (technologists).
- Supervise and sign off CoLab timesheets (technologists)
- Manage commissioned CoLab work and projects.
- Manage Co-Lab finances i.e. bill clients.
- Represent CoLab technologists.
- Advise on SCEPTRe's data backup strategy³
- Advise on SCEPTRe's long term technology strategy.
- Advise on technology issues within SCEPTRe

While I worked within a small research team, work originated from a variety of different customers. Often time was such that immediate action was required. Given limited resources this often presented some organisation challenges. A key part of my role as co-ordinator of the CoLab team was to prioritize the work, assign the resources to meet customer demands - a customer being a colleague, member of staff or someone outside of the university. An obvious first step was to make

¹ Made the job my own

² Made the job my own

³ Being creative and enterprising

an assessment of the time and skill level required to complete a particular task. This task fell to me though sensibly I took advice from subject experts on the team. Based on these estimates, the work was prioritised and assigned. Occasionally where there was a serious conflict between different customers this required going back to the customer and re-negotiating with the customer a revised time scale. Thankfully this was a rare occasion as a team we had a culture of delivering and flexibility. I also towards the end of my tenure became heavily involved in the commercialisation of CoLab, and after placement I am still involved in the CoLab⁴.

Given what I said above its not surprising that the main challenges were managing and prioritising different customer demands with very urgent demands with very short time scales. One of my greatest challenges of my job was to interpret what the customer wants and on a few rare occasions I was in a difficult position, where the customer didn't know or understand what they were asking for. On one occasion CoLab was commissioned by a customer to create a podcast of a series of lectures a guest speaker was doing at the University. The customer made it clear through 2 phone conversations that they would like a podcast. After confirming to the customer what a podcast was, we then agreed to take on the project. We filmed the first event and guaranteed that the podcast would be produced within 72 hours onto a DVD. Once the customer had viewed the product, she wasn't happy. The customer expected more than a podcast but wasn't sure what. This was a difficult conversation and in the end we had to cut our losses⁵. This experience has highlighted to me that customer relationships are a complicated beasts and continually evolving as all was not lost as a few months later the ex-customer re-commissioned CoLab to create her some podcasts and now with the right expectations⁶.

<http://leverhulmepubliclectureseries.pbworks.com/>

2. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Looking back over the year, I think there are three general areas where my learning and development has been greatest. These are:-

- Leadership skills
- Management skills
- Personal/technical development

Leadership Skills

One of the unexpected responsibilities was my role in managing/leading a small team of 4 highly skilled part-time students – the Co-Lab team⁷. This was my first experience of managing people in a formal work environment and I have to say a great learning experience. I was part of the interview panel and, given that I am usually sitting at the other side of the table in this process, I found it both

⁴ Made the job my own

⁵ Being a good communicator

⁶ Being able to work with and lead others (including working with clients and customers)

⁷ Being creative and enterprising

challenging and rewarding. My earliest conclusion was being a member of the panel is not as easy as you might think. The most obvious lesson was that good preparation was essential. Reading the candidates' applications/CVs; identifying from these strengths and weaknesses and thinking in advance about how these may be probed at interview were important approaches⁸. Also, recognising that some attributes such as inter-personal skills and communication ability and enthusiasm were factors that could really only be evaluated during the interview process. Sorting out reality from boastfulness in some of the CVs proved equally challenging. I particularly remember one candidate whose CV to me seemed too good to be true and whose inter-personal skills at interview were not great. We hired this candidate, despite my reservations, and in practice he has turned out to be one of the best team members – a clear lesson in humility for me.

I believe my natural leadership skill is very much to the democratic side of the spectrum (as opposed to autocratic). Having said this, putting that into practice was obviously a challenge. Given that I was new to the organisation, and had didn't really the know the team, I felt that I needed to earn the respect as leader. An essential part of my approach was openness and transparency, communicating with the team and ensuring they understood the bigger picture were key in this regard. Being willing to listen, whilst at the same time not shirking from making decisions, were essential. Weekly team meetings were essential and often frank⁹. These meetings were supplemented occasionally by social events which helped the team to gel. I was particularly pleased when the incarnation of CoLab disbanded, I believe, the genuine positive feedback I received from the team about my leadership skills.

Management Skills

I found that running a successful unit is not just about leadership. It became very obvious to me early on that if we were, as a team, to deliver to our demanding customers in very tight timescales that a high degree of organisation and general management focus were required. A good example of this was a large project near the beginning of my tenure, Story share site.

This project involved building a YouTube style video content website where users can upload, view digital stories and eventually user would be able to build there own digital stories on the site. Essential a one stop shop for digital stories. We primarily wanted to use an open source platform. No one in the team had ever built a site of this calibre and complexity. Where to begin? We decided to form sub teams to understand what type of platform would be suitable. This process was essentially hours of googling and then presenting back to the whole team¹⁰. It became apparent from the team's research that one team member had more of an understanding of the various platforms we could use, and he then inadvertently had become an instructor to us. He would talk us through in depth (and for some time!) how the platform, Drupal works and teach us how build modules on it. Once we had knowledge, we got cracking and completed the first phase of the site on time and no problem that we couldn't solve with the aid of google! This knowledge has become essential to me as I now when building a site often use the Drupal platform while often thinking back to the story

⁸ Behaving ethically and with social responsibility

⁹ Being a good communicator

¹⁰ Being able to find out what you need to know to do what you need to do

share project¹¹. This for me was one of my highlights of my placement year, our problem solving skills were put to the test and we had come up with some innovative solutions to get around problems¹². During the storyshare project, one of the team members suffered a family tragedy and as a team we provided emotional support and covered his work¹³.

www.storyshare.net

Probably my most successful project was the SCEPTRe Conference. The task was complex and daunting at first, covering a large plenary session and seven break-out sessions, each requiring to be filmed and technology support in overlapping timescales¹⁴ - particularly, challenging for a small team. A great deal of pre-planning (including budgeting), resource allocation was required, individual tasks clearly communicated on a one-to-one basis, timetables drawn up, significant pre-testing, recognising that conferences do not always go completely to schedule, contingency plans were put in place to deal with unexpected changes. Perhaps the best recognition for our success was that one of the external delegates to the Conference commissioned CoLab to provide a similar service for a conference being run by their institution a week later¹⁵.

Although, to the outside world, everything worked perfectly one individual in the team, for whatever reason, failed to deliver (i.e. being in the place at the right time) and I had to take quite direct action both with the individual and with the consequences of his failure.

With hindsight, my previous mistakes and during small seminars put me on good stead for the conference. If I ever need convincing of the importance of organisation, pre-planning and general good management, I just need to think of the SCEPTRe Conference and its success.

Personal/Technical Skills

I know I have developed enormously from a personal perspective over the past year. As well as the leadership and managerial experience mentioned above, I significantly developed my technical skills. On this front, as part of the internship I was given the chance to take up some external training with a fairly free remit as to content.

www.surrey.ac.uk/sceptre

Recognising this was an incredible opportunity; I took the initiative and thoroughly explored a number of options in order to choose an optimum course from both my own personal and the organisation's perspective. I also decided I wanted a course that was assessed which would not only give me some recognised accreditation but would also push me as assessments by their nature tend to do. I chose the Adobe certified Flash Hot Shot course by Academy Class, which was a weeklong

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¹² Being creative and enterprising.

¹³ Behaving ethically and with social responsibility.

¹⁴ Being a good communicator

¹⁵ Being able to find out what you need to know to do what you need to do

course with an exam at the end and if you pass the exam you received an Adobe Certified Accreditation (ACA)¹⁶.

In parallel with this formal training, I learnt an enormous amount from the Co-Lab team, many of whom were real experts in specific areas. Wherever sensible, I worked closely with individual team members on specific projects, with a view to learning, fantastic experience. Additionally, I had the advantage of my predecessor being around for the first four weeks and he provided a wealth of knowledge and information as an early start to my learning process¹⁷. I'm not sure what I would've done without him in the first couple of weeks.

www.co-lab.eu

I was particularly fortunate in having a boss who was open minded, supportive when I or the team came up with new ideas and was always accessible. Throughout the year his positive mentoring approach was, I believe, a key factor in my success.

3. BEING AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL

In my view, these are key areas that demonstrate professionalism:-

- An understanding of the context of your work and how you conduct yourself with others.
- The ability to identify and acknowledge how previous situations help to make informed decisions on how to act presently-essentially relating to what you've learnt and what you do now.
- Treating work not as just a job to get done but as a commitment to doing it well and to be really involved, enthusiastic and motivated.
- Making the job your own: improving on the role of the previous post-holder
- Transfer of knowledge, continually learning from others-never assuming that there's no more to learn about a given topic.
- Having confidence, seeking help when needed, recognising deficits in own knowledge and being willing to fill them by the correct channels.
- The ability to adapt and be flexible when given situations or problems arise

The above points have changed over the past year as I've worked with professionals and understood what it is to be a professional. As I have explained in some of the examples in Section 2, delivering to a number of different and demanding customers (both internal and external) was challenging. Managing to very tight deadlines required both a clear view of expectations and outcomes from a customer perspective as well as prioritisation of resources. Communicating well with the team and providing leadership when decisions needed to be made was all part of this.

However, of course, not everything worked perfectly and probably my greatest piece of learning in this regard resulted from a major embarrassment to both me and the team. The task involved was,

¹⁶ Managing and evaluating my own development.

¹⁷ Managing and evaluating my own development

in theory, quite straightforward. The customer required basically video content to be inserted in a relatively complex way into a PowerPoint presentation. As often happens, timescales were very tight – the requirement only emerged at 4.30 pm the day before the morning presentation¹⁸. The presentation was prestigious; the member of staff who was presenting was well thought of amongst colleagues and attracted an audience of around 20 people. One of my colleagues in the team offered to do the necessary re-formatting of the video content (relatively straight forward task), and I would then personally insert these into the presentation (a slightly more difficult task, under the time constraint)¹⁹. The re-formatted videos were to be available later that evening, giving me ample time to complete the second stage. In the event, I did not receive the videos until 20 minutes before the presentation was to start and when I did a quick check they had not been formatted correctly, only the first 59 seconds of each clip had been formatted. There was no time to correct the problem and the consequences were that both I and the team ended up looking completely unprofessional – a major disappointment and embarrassment to me. I reflected in detail on this experience and have made it available online:

www.shareexperience.net/wmpu/ChrisPlacement

So what went wrong?

Three things. Firstly, this new requirement from the customer, which was quite complex to execute, came very late in the day and probably should have been refused or at least simplified. Secondly, although the individual who offered to do the re-formatting task to was extremely technically competent, he also had somewhat of a reputation for being unreliable, particularly in delivering against tight timescales. Finally, when the material was not produced at the agreed time, I accepted that delivery the following morning would be ok.

So what did I learn from this debacle specifically as regards professionalism?

- Customers need to be managed and sometimes that means saying “no” to challenging/risky last minute changes.
- Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your team is vital. Although the individual in question had a reputation for unreliability I had not experienced that directly and in retrospect I should have assigned the task to a more reliable, albeit perhaps less technically brilliant individual.
- My major learning point was not acting decisively when the original deadline was not met.

I really have come to appreciate the importance of reflecting; throughout my placement I have been keeping a blog to which I have been reflecting on key events. I’ve found by keeping a blog it has re-enforced my own learning as I’m documenting often-difficult situations and analysing “what if” scenarios. I intend to make public after I leave I have appreciated the importance of looking back on what my own accomplishments and failures having being accounted to. It has been important for me to understand why various outcomes occurred and learning from mistakes so I could avoid them in the future.

¹⁸ Being able to deal with situations, solve problems, work with challenge and take advantage of opportunity

¹⁹ Being able to work with and lead others (including working with clients and customers)

In conclusion my placement has now come to an end and the writing of this report has encouraged me to reflect on my experience of the past 12 months. I found the experience both challenging and incredibly satisfying. I look forward to furthering my professional development upon my return to my final year at University.

Appendix Learning through Work Capability and Values statement

The Certificate encourages you to maximise the learning, personal and professional development you gain from your work experience. Underlying the scheme is the idea that you are developing your capability for being a professional. Professor Michael Eraut, who has studied how professionals learn through work defines capability as what you bring to a situation that enables you to think, interact and perform effectively. For this reason we are interested in how you develop your capability for dealing with situations and creating new situations in the particular work role you are undertaking. The capability statement identifies the areas of development that we would like you to be aware of while you are engaged in your work. In addition you will add any other capability that you believe is necessary for your work role.

The Certificate encourages you to develop and demonstrate your capability for managing and evaluating your own development for your role in the workplace.

1 Managing your own development: the attitudes, skills and behaviours that motivate and enable you to take responsibility for, plan and engage in experiences that enable you to develop yourself. In successfully completing the Certificate you will have demonstrated that you have:

- taken responsibility for, thought about, planned for and engaged in your own personal and professional development, taking advantage of the opportunities available to you
- reflected on and evaluated the learning, personal and professional development you have gained through your work experiences
- documented your experiences and what you have learnt from them, and gathered and organized evidence of your learning and development in your reflective diary or bog.

The Certificate emphasises the importance of developing capability to deal with situations (particularly new and challenging situations).

2 Being able to deal with situations: solve problems work with challenge and take advantage of opportunity: your reflections will show how you have worked with challenge and uncertainty, engaged with problems in a range of work situations. These stories will reveal how you have understood and analysed a situation, decided what to do, found things out in order to decide what needs to be done, done things and learnt through the experience. In short, how you have made things happen. Your stories will not necessarily reflect success, in some cases stories may reveal how you have had to overcome significant setbacks and demonstrate your resilience in the face of failure.

The Certificate encourages you to think about these important generic dimensions of capability to deal with situations and make things happen.

- 3 Being able to develop the knowledge you need to deal with the situation: to be able to find out what you need to know in order to do what you need to do.
- 4 Being creative and enterprising: you need to be creative, enterprising and resourceful to invent new solutions, adapt to changing circumstances in novel ways and create new opportunities for yourself.
- 5 Being an effective communicator : to make things happen you need to be an effective communicator, to be able to communicate in ways that are appropriate to the situation, to be able to communicate to different audiences using different media.
- 6 Being able to work with and lead others: your reflections will reveal how you have worked and developed relationships with other people and taken the initiative in helping others make good decisions and actions.
- 7 Behaving ethically and with social responsibility: your reflections will provide a vehicle for showing how you have dealt with ethical issues – how you have decided what is right or wrong, considered the values of others which are relevant in your activities, and tried to do the right thing.
- 8 And any other capabilities that you feel you need to be effective in your work role.