

13 You're the business – a custom-made business challenge for modern languages students

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Abstract

Modern Languages (ML) students often express concerns about their perceived lack of commercial awareness, worrying that this will put them at a disadvantage, compared with business graduates for instance, when applying for jobs. To try and change this perception, Newcastle University's School of Modern Languages (SML) teamed up with the Careers Service and two other Schools to design a custom-made, annual Business Challenge aimed at strengthening their business awareness and their confidence in their ability to thrive in a business-like environment. The challenge aims to make ML students engage with the concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurship, which can be crucial for those embarking on a career as freelance translator, for instance. It is also a way to expose students to a variety of employers, thus giving them a unique opportunity to network and to explore new avenues when applying for graduate schemes.

Keywords: business project, confidence, employability, entrepreneurship, experts, networks, soft skills.

1. Context and rationale

Most of our modern languages students rightly believe that being fluent in languages other than English is a plus on the job market. CBI's *Education and Skills Survey 2015: Inspiring Growth* confirmed this by showing that the

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proportion of businesses with no need for employees with language skills dropped to only 23% in 2015 compared to 35% the previous year (CBI/Pearson, 2015, pp. 41-42). Unfortunately, however, this is not the full picture. A decade ago, James Coleman made the point that despite high employment levels for language graduates six months after graduating, the proportion of modern languages students in graduate-level jobs is not always so promising (Coleman, 2004, p. 17). Many of our final-year students are aware of this difficulty and express concerns about their perceived lack of ‘commercial awareness’. Rightly or wrongly, they worry that this will put them at a disadvantage compared to business graduates, for instance, when applying for graduate jobs in general and for prestigious, competitive graduate schemes in particular. Such a dichotomy can be explained, according to Canning (2009), by the fact that “languages have been largely promoted as a skill (at all levels), rather than as a humanities discipline from which students will graduate with humanities type skills such as intercultural competence, independent learning, self-motivation, etc.” (p. 2). Interestingly for this case study, he then adds that this “skill/discipline rationale has interesting parallels with Mathematics, the use of which is important for a whole range of disciplines including Economics, Physical Sciences, Business, Accounting, etc., and their related professions” (Canning, 2009, p. 2). In an attempt to bridge this gap, we try at Newcastle University’s SML to follow closely recommendation number eight of the Worton Review on languages by “working more proactively on skills development and careers advice and guidance” (HEFCE, 2009, p. 37).

As the School’s Employability Officer, I am therefore constantly on the lookout for new initiatives that will allow our students to develop a greater awareness of all the ‘other’ soft skills they are developing while studying with us apart from pure linguistic skills – e.g. communication and interpersonal skills, critical reasoning, problem-solving, information-processing skills, self-awareness and motivation skills to name a few. Early 2014, I was invited by the Careers Service’s Rise Up Team – a team of Entrepreneurial Development Officers tasked with helping students develop their enterprising skills – to the presentation of a university-wide simulated Business Challenge they organise every year, FLUX. The presentation aimed to make us aware of the event

so we would encourage our students to take part in future events. FLUX is described by the Rise Up Team as a:

“fast paced and fun competition which [... gets students] solving real world problems with help from business experts and top graduate employers. Working in a team of six, [students] develop, plan and present a business strategy for a real challenge that [is] unveiled at the briefing session. [They] get the chance to bounce [their] ideas off experts in key business areas before pitching [their] strategy to a Dragons’ Den-style judging panel” (NU Careers Service, 2016, section 1).

FLUX is a model used by universities throughout the country and each local winning team, in addition to a GBP500 prize, gets sponsored to represent their university in the National Final.

Undeniably, participating in an event like FLUX could prove extremely advantageous to our SML students as it could help them become more aware of and make use of all their soft skills. However, FLUX in its original format potentially disadvantages SML students because they do not have formal training in business, unlike, for example, students in business-related disciplines. Adapting FLUX offered the potential to bring out soft skills and raise student awareness of the skills their language studies were giving them, and therefore, to boost their confidence. Two other schools in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS), the School of Mathematics and Statistics (Maths and Stats) and the School of Computing Science (CS) also favoured an adaptation of the FLUX model. As pointed out by Canning (2009) about maths as a subject, these two Schools have a similar skill/discipline rationale to the one we encounter in modern languages. This means that, even though their students have a very different skillset, most of them share our students’ identified lack of training and experience in business. All three schools (CS, Maths and Stats, and SML) therefore decided to team up to organise a FLUX-inspired Business Challenge in a more controlled – and, therefore, reassuring – environment so our students could benefit fully from the experience.

2. Aims and objectives

If a common objective to all three schools was to make students more confident in their soft skills by contributing to a business project through the challenge, our aims and objectives in the SML were more specifically to:

- strengthen SML students' business awareness and their confidence in their ability to thrive in a business-like environment thanks to the soft skills they have developed while studying with us;
- encourage SML students to engage with the concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurship as these can be seen as crucial for those considering self-employment (e.g. a career as freelance translator/interpreter) and demonstrating one's engagement with them can prove very useful for job interviews/selection centres;
- expose SML students to a variety of employers, thus giving them a unique opportunity to network and to explore new avenues when applying for graduate schemes.

3. What we did

3.1. Preparing the challenge

My colleagues from the Careers Service, CS, Maths and Stats and I met several times in Spring 2014 to discuss the timing and format of the CS, Maths and Stats and SML Business Challenge².

2. A huge thank you, here, to my colleagues Dr Phil Ansell (School of Mathematics and Statistics), Mrs Jackie Bell (Careers Service), Mr Steve Bowden (Careers Service), Ms Jos Harrison (Careers Service), Dr Dawn Weatherston (Careers Service) and Dr Steve Riddle (School of Computing Science) without whom the CS, Maths and Stats and SML Business Challenge (referred to as 'the challenge' or 'the Business Challenge' hereafter) and, therefore, this case study, could not have happened.

Concerning timing, it should be noted that the challenge is a time-consuming event as it takes place over two days; students are required to attend a briefing session on the evening of the first day (when the scenario is set) as well as the event itself the following afternoon and evening. We all agreed that the Business Challenge should take place halfway through the first semester of the academic year 2014-15. This was to ensure that participating final-year and MA students could draw on this experience when writing up their CVs and at job interviews, as quite a few major graduate schemes have a December or January application deadline.

Once suitable dates were identified, we had to decide whether the Business Challenge would be self-contained or feed into the University's annual FLUX event. We decided that our Business Challenge should be self-contained but we agreed that we would actively encourage the winning team to consider taking part in the University's FLUX event.

As the challenge must answer a real business need, we looked for a major employer that would appeal to all our students to set it. As a major employer of languages, maths and computing students, intelligence agency Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) was the ideal employer to set the challenge and we were very grateful they accepted to do so and send experts to help students on the day. Each school collaborated with them on the elaboration of a scenario that worked for all three schools. We then invited two other employers to act as business experts and judges on the day of the event. The SML invited two language graduates working as an established freelance translator/interpreter and a project manager respectively, and other invited employers represented Aldi, Ernst and Young, Procter and Gamble, Santander and Teach First. All employers were carefully briefed on their role as experts and judges ahead of the event.

Finally, we agreed that each School would invite 30 students and that all 15 teams would be made up of two CS, two Maths and Stats and two SML students. We felt that having students work collaboratively with peers from other subject areas would reflect the true nature of work in a business-like environment.

3.2. The Business Challenge

The Business Challenge took place on Tuesday 18th November 2014 (5.30-7.30pm) and Wednesday 19th November (1pm-8.30pm). Participating students had to register ahead of the event. Upon arrival at the briefing session on the Tuesday evening, students were welcomed and split into teams. The scenario was then unveiled by GCHQ – students were asked to develop a business proposal on online security. They were given the rest of the session to start generating ideas and were encouraged to take part of the evening and the following morning to continue doing so.

On the next day, students were welcomed back and introduced to Alexander Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas³ to help them develop their business idea along the following lines: key partnerships, activities and resources, value proposition of proposal and target customers, customer relationships and communication channels with customers, and, last but not least, cost structures and revenue streams. They were given three hours to do so in their teams with the help of employers and members of the Rise Up Team in their capacity as business experts. Students were also encouraged to recognise that employers were experts in different business areas and to make use of all the expertise they needed for their project, thus encouraging them to network to enhance their business proposal. All teams were then given one hour to prepare for the pitches that took place from 5-6.30pm. The teams were split into three streams of five teams and all were given ten minutes to pitch their business proposal followed by five minutes' questions in front of a panel made up of one member of GCHQ, one member of the Rise Up Team and one academic. Stream winners were then announced to the whole group and participants were given feedback on presentations. This was followed by a final, one-minute 'elevator pitch' in front of the whole group who then voted for the winning team. After some more feedback from employers and prize-giving, all students and staff were invited to a drinks reception so as to give everyone a final opportunity for networking.

3. <http://www.businessmodelgeneration.com/canvas/bmc>

4. Discussion and conclusion

Students' feedback on the event was extremely positive with 98% of respondents very satisfied or satisfied with it. Students said the challenge helped them improve their teamwork skills, organisational skills as well as their communication and presentation skills in a 'non-intimidating environment'. An SML student said this was "one of the best things [they] have done at University – and it will be great to talk about at forthcoming interviews". Another one of our SML students emailed us to say "how fantastic I thought the Business Challenge was [...], it's something that I never thought would be possible for a language student such as myself to achieve and I'm really grateful that we were given this opportunity". Such qualitative feedback from language students seems to show that we have achieved our first objective of growing our students' confidence in their ability to thrive in a business-like environment. Indeed, all employers praised students' innovative ideas and the expert from Procter and Gamble added that "it was an excellent advert of the talent in the Maths, Computing and Languages courses". Similarly, the expert from GCHQ said he hoped "some of [your students] will think of us when they come to apply for jobs". More disappointingly, a language student commented that "the scenario should be set to get Modern Languages Students more involved". Even though the scenario did not contain any language-specific elements, the task did require excellent communication skills from the teams as they had to pitch sometimes complex, technical online security processes to a lay audience. The more successful pitches were the ones that used language students to do so by letting them 'decode' the key technical message and 'encode' it back into lay language (what would be known as 'code-switching' in the language class). The feedback made us realise that we could make even more of an effort during the challenge to help our languages students realise that they do, in fact, possess the soft skills necessary for the task besides their language skills.

In December 2015, we organised a second CS, Maths and Stats and SML Business Challenge that built on the success of the first one while taking account of the more negative feedback. We followed the same format but made sure the challenge set by GCHQ took into consideration the particular strengths

of languages students, for example in communication. We also made students aware of their soft skills during the briefing and insisted on the importance of communication skills for the pitches. The second event was as successful as the first one with all respondents (80% of attendants) saying they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the event and that it “increased their understanding of how to develop a business idea”. The qualitative feedback was equally positive with one student saying “I feel like I’ve got valuable experience to add to my CV”. GCHQ were so impressed with the quality of the business proposals put forward by finalists that they invited them to present their ideas at a meeting of Newcastle Chapter of Open Web Application Security Project (OWASP) that gathers employers from across the region in January 2016. Boosted by this incredible outcome we intend to organise a third Business Challenge next year that may include students from another school, the School of Psychology. I hope that colleagues will see from this case study that this formula for a custom-made Business Challenge, which can easily be replicated elsewhere, can help our language students become aware of all the soft skills they have gained through their studies with us. This should also make them confident that, when it comes to business, they have a huge amount of skills to offer!

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