

TMI – Too Much Information: creating employability skills resources – enabling students to develop an effective interface with a client

Professor Anne Hill

Birmingham City University, UK

Simon Spencer

Birmingham City University, UK

Nicola Bartholomew

Birmingham City University, UK

Abstract

Employers identify challenges when attempting to wean graduate employees from behaviours instilled through the process of assessment. When required to offer advice to the new organisation's clients, graduates may convey information that is factually correct but extending beyond what is really needed, thus providing their client with TMI – 'Too much information'. Opportunities for students to develop transferable skills should be integral to curriculum design to better meet the needs of employers and clients.

Birmingham City University collaborated with employers to create a toolkit of resources encouraging development of better skills. This paper focuses on one element of this toolkit, reviewing the problems in conveying 'too much' information in four different contexts. Construction of the resources and their implementation within the classroom has been evaluated at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, establishing their useability across a wide range of disciplinary fields. We can reveal that the resources provide value in supporting the development of transferable skills when embedded within contextualised teaching sessions.

Keywords: Communication, skills, employability, transferability

Introduction

Creating Future-proof Graduates was one of nine projects selected in the first round of a new scheme in the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in 2006-2007. The scheme awarded up to £200,000 to realise a project which would have wide applicability in the higher education sector. The project was based at Birmingham City University, one of the post-1992 universities, and was led by a team comprising two National Teaching Fellows and academics with the support of a doctoral research assistant for part of the project. The project team reported progress to the HEA and to a Project Board, a body made up of employers, representatives from university faculties and University Central Services including the Students' Union. The Board also included partners from other further and Higher Education Institutions and other interested organisations, including the Centre for Recording Achievement and one of the HEA Subject Centres, and provided an objective sounding board to the project team.

Student feedback at the team's own institution (then UCE Birmingham, 2006) led us to believe that the most effective way to encourage the development of employability skills in students was to enable them to discover and develop these skills through critical exploration within their own learning and professional contexts (Palmer, 1998; Biggs 1999, cited Spiller, 2005). The project produced a number of resources which we argue support deeper learning and the development of transferable skills, through the development of a range of resources, using high and low levels of technology in their creation. The materials became available for use and adaptation to the full range of academic disciplines from December 2009 and are available at www2.bcu.ac.uk/futureproof. This paper reviews the development of, testing and evaluation of TMI, one of the created resources which uses a set of critical incident triggers to demonstrate the relevance and significance of an issue common across many disciplines, and support students to become aware of the potential for them to create a communication barrier with future clients and consider how they might address this when the situation arises.

Identification of the specific skills gap

Yorke and Knight (2002) identified a number of constructs for employability in higher education, any of which would enable a good graduate to 'stay in the race' (Brown 2002,

cited Yorke and Knight, 2002). Throughout the Creating Future-proof Graduates project, the team focused on the construct which embedded the materials within the curriculum, to provide opportunities for students to develop, practise and reflect upon a varied range of 'employability' skills (Morton et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2009). Critical incidents have often been used in the Health Educational field (Lockyer et al., 2005). As such incidents normally occur in the workplace, these incidents were created in partnership with employers to reflect real world scenarios. Critical incidents can prove a useful addition to teaching repertoires as they engage learners in ways other teaching approaches do not as they make possible more opportunities for students to become self aware and self developmental. The incidents act as triggers which may be used to spark exploration of issues, often by facing students with dilemmas or ethically challenging behaviours, and these, supported by discussion, debate and other activities, encourage the deep learning process.

Knight and colleagues (2002, p.2) suggested it was useful to focus on a few 'employability skills' and to 'bombard' students with as many opportunities to practise as possible. Simulations have a role in providing suitable environments for such practice, especially where students are given the time and space to be reflective, as suggested by Schön (1987).

A scoping review of research into the employability skills gap was carried out by the project team. The Institute of Directors (IoD) Briefing (2007) said employers found most graduates were unprepared for employment and highlighted that employability skills were perceived by employers as more important than subject specific skills. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) argued that:

Much more effort needs to be made...to get the message across that going to university and coming out with a 2.1...is not enough to land a graduate level job. You have to develop your skills and experience...21st century graduates need to demonstrate to employers that they can 'hit the ground running'. (*Daily Mail*, 30 January 2007).

Following the scoping exercise, the project team conducted in-depth interviews with students, graduates, employers and academic staff to understand the individual perception and/or experience of 'graduate employability'. The interviews were exploratory and aimed

to elicit areas of difficulty which, in the early stages in the workplace, were relevant to graduates' development as professionals. Employers and graduates were questioned regarding the most important employability skills. It became obvious that there were some clear overlaps between graduates' and employers' views:

- Literacy: writing for diverse audiences.
- Personal attributes: developing assertiveness (saying 'no').
- People related skills.
- Dealing with shocking situations (what to do when a theoretical model fails).
- Career related: finding out what they do not want to do; understanding the profession and knowing how to go about finding information.

These findings were compared to the range of secondary sources which also identified people related communication skills, as for example Archer and Davison (2008) who discovered employers rated this skill as the most important, but which was ranked only 16th in terms of the actual abilities of new graduates to manage. Therefore one of the resources was planned to focus on communication with clients and TMI was born.

The rationale behind TMI

With the employer partners to the project raising the issue of developing good communication skills, it was recognised that even though the work students covered in their course provided the knowledge, there remained concerns at how this was then communicated to clients. Students often garner a great deal of information and feel that they must communicate this knowledge, ensuring that the person they are working with can understand the technicalities of their situation. However, employers suggested that the skill of selecting the right information for the right circumstances is one of the keys to effective communication.

In this scenario, using the modern 'text speak' acronym 'TMI', the vision for the critical incident was a series of triggers where new graduates are providing information to a client. The information is always technically correct, but it raises a series of questions:

- Is this appropriate information to give the client at this time?
- Is it meeting the needs of the client?
- What information is appropriate to provide at a given time?
- How could a new graduate gauge what approach would best serve the client and improve communication?

Students can be quite blinkered in their attitudes to generic information, resisting seeing the appropriateness of a subject unless it has direct links to the subject of their degree. This is sometimes why multi disciplinary working can be difficult to implement, as students find it quite problematic to transfer their knowledge and experiences from one setting to another (Berryman, 1991). Yet both practitioners and academics know that many skills are transferable, and that in the workplace subject specific information can be useful, but being able to communicate beyond disciplinary boundaries is essential. Part of our task was to support students in changing their views of the world, helping them to realise that there is more to skills than just having the explicit knowledge and rules (Brown et al., 1989).

To demonstrate both the transferability of the TMI phenomenon and the need for responses which would meet the needs of clients in as wide a range of situations as possible, it was originally envisaged that a number of scenarios would be recorded and students would be able to start by selecting the scenario closest to their own disciplinary field, then later be able to see how the situation is mirrored in other contexts. In reality, however, time and resources meant paring the scenarios down to four, with their focus in the areas of Social Housing, Radiography, Web Design and Education. These were felt to demonstrate the wide relevance of the issue across disciplines.

Creating the resources

According to Beetham (1997), ICT, if used imaginatively, can enhance the student's experience of learning. Given that the project team had already used video clips to develop some of the other critical incidents within the overall project and animation had been used to develop another, it was envisaged that in this case the scenarios could be devised as a series of photo 'strip cartoons' (still images with recorded voice-overs) to maximise accessibility and demonstrating an alternative medium for presenting materials.

It was planned to create a range of scenarios applicable across social sciences, education, health, technical and business studies, giving wide multidisciplinary coverage and transferability of use. As previously stated, four scenarios were completed, although the fourth scenario (visiting a web designer to try to improve the marketing for a small business) was the last to be developed and therefore was not evaluated, although interest in using this scenario in the design disciplines means it will be used and evaluated in the future.

Creating the TMI resource began with the premise that students learn best when they have fun (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998). To link the scenarios one actress experienced a communication barrier with each of the 'new' professionals, creating a humorous counterpoint to the serious message conveyed by the resources, as she moves from interface to interface, encountering our new graduates in a variety of settings, experiencing their desire to communicate what they knew about the situation, but taking little account of her needs. Thus the four scenarios have the same 'client':

- She visits a housing office when her home is under threat because of her husband's redundancy.
- She attends her teenaged son's school for a parents' evening.
- She has a hospital appointment for a barium enema.
- She makes an appointment with a web designer to discuss a site for a new business venture.

In each case, the information supplied by the new graduate in their professional role as housing officer, teacher, radiographer and web designer is factually correct and thoroughly explained, but the use of jargon and the need of the new graduate to get over their share of the information take precedence over the needs of the client. Following each interaction there is a short clip recorded with the client, establishing how she felt about the encounter and what her needs had actually been.

The project team were keen to engage students in the creation of the resources and employed students to act, photograph and record the first scenario, the visit to the housing office. In the TMI resource the client was a professional actress who was an alumni of the university.

Just having four scenarios does not minimise the transferability of the resource but may limit how many others want to use it, given what has been said (Berryman, 1991) about the sometimes blinkered approach of students (and some staff). Having said all this, once the concept was available to demonstrate, it has become relatively simple to create new subject specific scenarios as scripts which could be acted by students in their classrooms or by staff using something as simple as PowerPoint animations, with or without audio accompaniments. Guidance on how to use the materials and suggested exercises, and how to prepare students for activities such as listening skills and role plays, have been produced following the evaluation of the material used in a series of classrooms during the testing of the created resources, and are all available through the website.

Using and testing the materials

Classroom interaction prompted by the trigger clips has included discussions about the way the new graduate focused the attention on the information they knew and what might have been more appropriate, and, working in groups, students have rewritten and role played the scenarios in what they saw as a more appropriate way, providing reasoning for their choices. Adult motivation and learning are enhanced if the learning context and materials are authentic and relevant to the student's needs, especially if knowledge can be immediately applied (Caffarella 2002, cited Winning et al., 2004).

It would also be possible to help students step into the client's shoes by showing the scenarios from outside their own discipline, where they would be recipients of the information, as if they were clients rather than imagining themselves as the professional. Therefore, as suggested by Brown et al. (1989), the way this resource was used could support teachers in helping change students' views of their world and their roles.

The resources have been tested at Birmingham City University with postgraduate and undergraduate housing students in the School of Social Sciences, with trainee teachers in the School of Secondary and Post-compulsory Education, and with Radiography students. The evaluation process continues as others from outside the university have begun to use the resources, and the resource has been embedded within new classes and continues to receive positive reactions with students. For example, out of 87 respondents attending presentations about the project as a whole, 55% said they were likely to use or adapt TMI,

and feedback indicated that participants found the resources ‘easy to adopt to suit individual institutions needs’ and that it was ‘great to know I can make the resource context specific’.

Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with trainee teachers

Scenario 1 – The Parents’ Evening

A group of 17 trainee drama teachers undertaking their initial teacher training, which includes some study at Master’s level, was the first to evaluate this resource within a classroom session. The session comprised a set of activities focused around the TMI scenario. These activities opened with a discussion on parents’ and teachers’ expectations of the meeting, typically held in schools, concerning the progress of individual pupils. It is a statutory requirement that schools make provision for this consultation with parents but, as is made clear in the TMI scenario, parents and teachers can have different agendas. The discussion was in two parts and considered the expectations of both teachers and parents separately. This was followed by watching the TMI scenario on DVD, then using the transcript to revise the content, and concluded with a role play session where the trainee teachers had the opportunity to create their own version of the parents’ meeting which sought to bring together the different agendas in a mutually satisfactory way. Using a pro forma questionnaire, trainee teachers were invited to reflect on the usefulness of the different aspects of the exercise in the context of their training and preparation for becoming a teacher (from 1 ‘not very useful’ to 4 ‘very useful’).

Table 1. Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session – trainee teachers.

	a. discussion	b. discussion	c. DVD	d. transcript	e. role play
Median	3	3	4	3	4

The following comments explain some of the ratings. In eight of the comments given by the students, the opportunity to practise in the role play was perceived as a very useful activity and emphasised. Two students also commented on the DVD and that it was useful to have an illustration of a poor meeting. Overall, the session as a whole was praised by the group.

Explicit comments given by individual student participants – trainee teachers:

- The role play was a very effective method to consolidate my learning from the session.
- Allowed me to discuss potentially difficult scenarios in a safe environment.
- Useful to think about communicating to parents and practise it.
- The role play enabled me to think more specifically about what I would say.
- It was extremely useful how not to conduct such a meeting...then struggle our way through conducting a hypothetical meeting.
- Very useful insight and practice into parents' evening and the process needed to be successful.

In terms of considering the appropriateness of activities to accompany the DVD, it was suggested that role play was a very useful activity. However, it is possible that this was due to the context since the group evaluating the resource consisted of graduates in drama and related disciplines training to teach drama in schools.

Notwithstanding the group's familiarity with role play as a vehicle for learning and their evident appreciation of the opportunities it afforded for individuals to 'practise in a safe environment', the discussion surrounding the DVD and the evaluation of the role play exercise also provided useful insights into the trainee teachers' understanding of the wider issues. For example, exploring the notion of teachers and parents having separate agendas for their meetings illustrates the need to 'make the tacit explicit' (Russell and Loughran, 2007, p.5). Similarly, testing the materials also allowed the group to recognise the danger they faced in subconsciously believing that because information existed, it was required by the client. Whilst this lies at the very heart of the TMI project, the actual danger is that, in the case of the parents' evening scenario, the information that is ultimately 'too much' has been generated by the teacher as a result of sustained hard work. The sub-text of the conversation was that the client should acknowledge this fact.

Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with housing students

Scenario 2 – A Housing Crisis

The mixed cohort of 27 full and part time housing students started the session with a discussion of their approaches to clients and communication, followed by watching the DVD. In this case students viewed the subject specific scenario but were then asked to ‘put themselves in the client’s shoes’ by watching one of the other scenarios. Following discussions about the impact of being a client, they worked in pairs to create their own role plays of a more appropriate set of responses, some of which were demonstrated to the rest of the class.

The students shared their experiences from work. The majority of the students in this group were mature and exhibited having some familiarity and experience with the issue presented to them. The group was mixed in the levels of experience of the workplace. The DVD presenting a simulation of a housing crisis was shown and discussed. Also, to illustrate the perspective from another viewpoint, the group was shown Scenario 3, the patient and radiographer situation at the hospital. Viewing these scenarios provided a different context from which students could begin to experience and understand the client’s perspective. Following discussions about the impact of being a client, the students were given the original housing scripts and worked in pairs to create their own role plays of a more appropriate set of responses, some of which were demonstrated to the rest of the class.

Table 2. Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session – housing.

	a. group discussion	b. DVD on Housing	c. DVD Hospital	d. working with scripts	e. role play
Median	4	3	3	3	3

Table 2 above indicated that the discussion with peers, especially that between part time, experienced students and those without experience, was the most useful activity in the session. The remaining activities were perceived as useful to set the scene and raise awareness that communications need to be tailored to suit the needs of clients.

Explicit comments given by individual student participants – housing:

The students' comments on the session referred to this being useful as a whole. Students particularly highlighted the benefits of exploring and reflecting on assumptions and clients' reactions:

- ...very useful, I saw different ways of dealing with people.
- Good session, provided insight into how housing professionals can approach situation making assumptions.
- I feel that my confidence, skills and knowledge have been increased by studying theory and has widened my repertoire on which I can draw and apply in the workplace.

Evaluating the testing of the TMI resource with radiography students

Scenario 3 – The Hospital Appointment

Another variation in the use and delivery of the resources is identified within the context of the radiography trial. This trial used the hospital appointment scenario which relates to a barium enema, an examination which is routinely undertaken within radiology departments. The trial gathered feedback from a large group of level 4 Diagnostic Radiography students and so the resource was highly contextualised. The scenario was introduced as a 'patient information film', developed by a fictional media company. The student group were asked to review the resource in terms of its applicability to practice and in so-doing they were prompted to consider both factual and communication issues.

The radiography trial undertaken within a large lecture theatre did not use role play as an activity but, as with the other trials, it engaged students in paired discussions following the DVD. The paired discussions were then shared with the whole class and key issues were identified and summarised by the tutor. The activity preceded a wider lesson about the examination in question, thus providing an opportunity to incorporate different learning and teaching methods to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles. Students rated the aspects of the session as follows:

Table 3. Median of ratings for the activities in the taught session – radiography.

	a. DVD	b. discussions in Pairs	c. negatives and positives
Median	3	3	3

Many of the students in this group had not attended clinical placement within a radiography department at this point and many who had attended admitted that they still had limited experience in talking to patients in this context. Previous feedback from clinical practice also suggested that some students would have valued more preparation before seeing the examination in practice. This resource, used as part of a wider examination-specific lesson plan, clearly meets a learning need by preparing students for radiography practice, but importantly helps them to empathise, and therefore communicate effectively, with vulnerable patients.

Explicit comments given by individual student participants – radiography:

- The DVD assisted in showing how not to communicate with patients and the effects.
- More emphasis on exactly what to say, and ask the patient.
- ...being a radiographer isn't just reading guidelines and understanding them or not just discussing your experience but to put all that in practice.
- Learning from others, discussing experiences and the theory and guidelines are all important.
- What to say and what not to say was useful.

Developing confidence in dealing with clients

In addition to evaluating the value of the various components of the teaching sessions, students were asked about their confidence in dealing with clients before and after the sessions. Their responses were analysed to establish whether the students perceived the sessions, previous experience, or other sources as crucial in their level of perceived confidence.

TMI Education (Parents' Evening)

On both occasions, before and after, the students related their confidence in dealing with a particular issue (parents) to their own experience, or lack of experience in schools. Only one student commented that they had 'observed and attended a parents' meeting'. However, after the session, despite the limited practical experience in schools, some students were able to reflect on and identify specific areas needing improvement. For example, one student was able to acknowledge their limited experience and how this may impact on communications with parents: 'not enough experience of assessment and parent interaction to feel prepared to discuss progress with parents'.

TMI Housing

Work-based experience is clearly an important learning opportunity for students, enabling the acquisition of contextualised knowledge and skills. When considering the housing group, the majority had gathered considerable work experience and it may therefore come as no surprise that there was no perceivable change in their level of confidence when interacting with customers, neither before nor after the activity:

I have good knowledge of homelessness, excellent interviewing skills and I always prepare myself prior to an interview.

Having experience of working in housing helps put everything into perspective that you learn in the classroom.

Nevertheless, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation is an important element of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and the TMI activities provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own practice, discuss concepts with tutors and peers, and experiment through role-play. In this way, pre-conceived ideas may be changed through shared experiences which may then inform future practice.

TMI Radiography

The radiography student group demonstrated varied levels of experience in clinical practice. Prior to the TMI activity, the students showing the lowest level of confidence had

not yet attended work placement and this group ultimately showed the biggest increase in confidence following the teaching session. As with housing, the radiography students who had attended work placement and had been active in preparing patients for clinical examinations demonstrated the highest levels of confidence. However, some students revealed that attendance on placement did not necessarily yield good results. One student commented that in their experience: 'if the department was busy, good communication with patients might suffer'. Another commented that they had anticipated that the role of communicating with the patient to prepare them for the examination would have been allocated to administrative staff. Students did feel that it was important to have 'help from the radiographers on how to prepare patients' and the session helped raise an awareness that 'patients might be anxious', thus reinforcing the need to develop effective communication skills to prepare the patient and alleviate concerns.

Conclusion

The TMI problem is a multi disciplinary issue and employers have reported that it is one we could address with students before they enter the workplace and start dealing with clients. The resources created through the project provided useful triggers for other activities.

From a training perspective, the TMI materials also provided a very valuable opportunity to assess the students in their journey towards meeting professional competencies. Some of these competencies refer to directly related skills, such as a professional's ability to communicate appropriately with a range of stakeholders. Other competencies relate to less tangible, yet equally important, aspects of professionalism, such as the demonstration of appropriate values and attitudes. It is clear that the use of these materials can contribute significantly to our students' knowledge and understanding and, in terms of meta-cognition, to their ability to reflect on their own professional development.

In summary, these findings demonstrate that this resource, when embedded into a contextualised teaching session dealing with wider issues of communication, has a value in supporting the development of the transferable skill of selecting the information which is appropriate to the needs of the client needing the advice of our new graduates.

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Author details

Professor Anne Hill is based in the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences, Birmingham City University where she was a Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow and is a Programme Director for the suite of undergraduate Housing programmes. She is a National Teaching Fellow and was a member of the project team which developed and delivered the Higher Education Academy funded National Teaching Fellowship Project 'Creating Future-proof Graduates'. She led the development and realisation of TMI - Too Much Information, which was one of eight resources created for this project.

Nicola Bartholomew is a Senior Academic in the School of Health and Social Care and is Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow for the Faculty of Health at Birmingham City University. Nicola was a content creator for TMI – Too Much Information, one of eight resources created for the Creating Future-proof Graduates Project for the National Teaching Fellowship Project strand at the Higher Education Academy

Simon Spencer is the Deputy Head of the School of Education in the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences at Birmingham City University. He is Course Director for the PGCE Secondary Education in the Faculty of Education, Law & Social Sciences at Birmingham City University. Simon was a content creator for TMI – Too Much Information, one of eight resources created for the Creating Future-proof Graduates Project for the National Teaching Fellowship Project strand at the Higher Education Academy