

Project Phoenix- Engaging students in the design and delivery of Psycho Education in a School Context

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Summary

This case study will discuss the engagement of undergraduate students studying Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling (PPC) at one university, in a project designed to bring psychoeducation into a school context. Project Phoenix involved undergraduate students in the session design and delivery, of six psychoeducation sessions delivered to school age children. Mental health awareness in schools and universities has become increasingly topical, making this project extremely timely. We present reflections from both a student and a staff perspective and propose CASE: Confidence, Apply skills, Supportive and safe environment and Employability skills development, as an approach to engage young people. This case study will discuss the process of engaging students in designing and delivering the sessions and reflects on the project incorporating student voice.

Description of project

There is an increasing number of professionals who support young people within the school context with their health and emotional needs, with psychologists and youth workers becoming commonplace in educational settings (Hanley, Noble & Toor, 2017). It is acknowledged that adolescence is a challenging life stage with biological, psychological, and social changes (Coleman, 2011) and with this is fluctuation in emotional well-being during this stage. It has been suggested that 75% of all mental illness emerges before the age of 25 (Kessler et al., 2007), with later research suggesting this to be 50% before the age of 15 (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012). Mental health can impact all aspects of young people's lives including their relationships, educational attainment, and quality of life (Patel et al, 2007). Despite the high prevalence of mental health issues in young people, this is not matched with the level of service use. Indeed, getting young people to access health services can be a challenge, especially services related to mental health (Kranke et al, 2010; Turner et al, 2007).

Project Phoenix is a creative and collaborative psychoeducation programme supporting the delivery of counselling in a school context. The project was named as such since Phoenix has a meaning related to new beginnings, strength, and creativity;

all of which apply to the nature and the development of this project. The project aimed to reduce the stigma around mental health, enabling 60 University Collegiate School (UCS) young people (aged 15- 16) in their final year of high school, about to undertake their GCSE's, that the intervention was delivered to, the opportunity to talk about mental health with undergraduate students on a psychology pathway. The UCS is within the University of Bolton's partnership group and teaches young people aged 11-16 specialising in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine) subjects. The students on the pathway develop counselling skills and apply these skills during this module. The module has three learning outcomes;

1. Critically reflect on counselling skills and theory to develop a deliverable psycho-education session.
2. Demonstrate real world experience of delivering psychoeducation.
3. Critically apply counselling knowledge, theory, and skills.

Every session was delivered under the supervision of a registered counsellor/psychologist, as well as teaching or safeguarding staff from the UCS. University students gained the opportunity to design and deliver psychoeducation workshops, providing invaluable employability skills, allowing students to gain real world experience of delivering a counselling-based workshop, utilising theory and skills developed on the degree, developing their skills and knowledge in an applied setting. Undergraduate students were engaged throughout the process from the design to the delivery of the 6-week workshops, linking to formative and summative assessment. The provision allows the young people at the UCS the opportunity to utilise the sessions and gain the benefits the sessions offer. The project was evaluated by the authors after the 6-sessions were completed. The project was evaluated broadly in terms of, the skills students felt they had applied, what they felt they had gained from the project and how the project could be improved. It is this evaluation that forms the basis of this case study.

Student engagement can be through the design and delivery of the learning, including curriculum development, which is how students were involved in this case study. They can also be engaged in structures and process which can include feedback, student representation and participation in University governance (Trowler, 2010, p.10). In proposing this case study of student engagement, we the authors, are inclined to agree with Matthews (2016) who put forward that students may not realise why they are engaged in activities and therefore clear learning outcomes and objectives are needed. The value of clear and transparent student engagement is expressed in the following quote by Matthews (2016) '*engaging students and academics in conversations around curricular decisions and questions of learning invites students behind the scenes of higher education*' (p 2). This project allowed students to think about, and develop the curriculum based on the needs of the UCS students and understand how their counselling skills and knowledge can be applied in this setting.

This case study will explain an innovative programme of experiential learning and consider engagement of undergraduate university students in the design and delivery of psycho-education sessions. Schools are viewed as potential hubs for offering young people mental health support (Department of Health, 2015). Schools afford a convenient access point that children who need additional support will be familiar with (Humphrey, Wolpert, Hanley, Sefi & Shorrocks, 2012). Mental health awareness and the reduction of stigma is important for schools to address

(Singletary et al, 2015). Through student engagement this project facilitated changes in curriculum development, by allowing students the opportunity to have control over the design of their own sessions supporting the students experience and the enhancement of their learning, all of which are evidenced by the findings showcased in this case study.

The intervention

The project also embeds employability skills (intervention design, delivery, practice of group counselling skills, understanding and evaluation of impact of interventions) enhancing the student experience through student engagement, generating opportunities for students to develop skills and facilitating opportunities for personal and professional development. The project endorses attributes focusing on self-awareness, resiliency, and employability. Moreover, this approach addresses several of the Teaching Excellence Framework metrics (Department for Education, 2016) including, community engagement, the personalisation of what is delivered by, and for, the students, thus providing both a challenging, engaging, and supportive teaching environment.

In liaison with staff at the UCS, students designed and developed a six-week psycho-education session including sessions related to anxiety, stress, exam stress, healthy relationships, online safety, and bullying. The psycho-education sessions were interactive, for example students made affirmation cards, stress balls and gadget spinners to understand and reduce stress and anxiety. Students also devised activities and games to get messages across (SEE APPENDIX A for examples). This project received funding from the University of Bolton's Jenkinson Award to evaluate the project.

Institutional context: factors leading to project initiation

The University of Bolton is a small university situated in the North West of England. The university is a teaching intensive, research informed university. The University Strategic Plan 2015-2020 placed student experience and employability as a key priority. With 'student well-being at the heart of our work' the university has a strong strategic vision on the well-being of its students. The project is situated in a UK University and school context but is applicable to a wider audience, national and international.

Methods and data analysis

To consider the effectiveness of the project, qualitative methods in the form of semi structured interviews were conducted with the undergraduate students involved in this project. All six undergraduate students that volunteered were female aged between 18-30 years. After the 6-weeks of delivery the students took part in a face-to-face interview with a bursaried student researcher. The aim of the interview was to gain an understanding and insight into what the students had learnt from taking part in the project, the benefits of taking part as well as challenges they had encountered. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviews took between 30 mins and 1 hour. All members of the research team read the transcriptions and extracted themes.

The transcripts were then analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 10 software. A reflective TA approach was used which was open to the data with no code book used (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach was viewed the most appropriate since it allowed the researchers to gain a depth to understand the benefits and challenges articulated by the students to develop the project. Since two authors were involved in the project it was deemed important for both authors to familiarised themselves with the data and developed themes, highlighted below. This also provided an inter-rater reliability check which is not required by the Braun and Clarke TA process but added a level of quality for this project which we, the authors, felt was useful in developing the CASE approach proposed in this publication. Once the analysis had been completed, all coders discussed the coding process and themes for consistency checking and to examine inter-rater reliability. Consistency was high throughout.

The themes from the data related to the applied counselling, and the employability, skills the students gained through doing the sessions, as well as the challenges they overcame. The data analysis then followed an iterative process of theme identification and labelling the relevant text in NVivo as new themes began to develop from the transcripts. The three main themes, the sub themes and the authors interpretation of these led to the development of the CASE (Confidence, Apply skills, Supportive and safe environment and Employability skills development) approach to engage students, proposed in this paper.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

Overall, the findings were very positive. The students enjoyed the challenge and the engagement aspect of designing and delivering the sessions. It was apparent that the undergraduate students had learnt, and benefitted, a lot from the experience. The students enjoyed the opportunity to work as a team, applying the skills they had learnt during their degree such as opening and closing sessions and they appreciated and felt they had benefitted from this being a new experience for them. Additionally, they learnt to overcome anxieties and they found the setting quite challenging at times dealing with a classroom of 30 young people. However, this new setting enabled them to build their confidence and become adaptable to the situation. Over the six weeks it was clear the students had built a rapport with students whilst applying numerous counselling skills: listening, paraphrasing, building a relationship and developing several employability skills as well. Findings reveal the project provided students an engaging learning experience, enhancing and applying their counselling skills and developing their employability skills. Table 1 gives an example quote of the themes developed from the student evaluations.

Table 1. Themes, subthemes, and an example quote from the students experience of being involved in the project

Theme	Subtheme	Example quote
Counselling skills		<i>Yeah, I would say that it but my confidence and made me realise I can do it. It was enjoyable and, we got to use the skills we learnt in our whole course.</i>

		<i>We could really apply those skills on kids. (Student 4)</i>
	Paraphrasing	<i>Yeah, we applied skills such as paraphrasing. Like I said build a rapport with them. Then gaining their trust. We didn't judge them. It was a safe environment. (Student 6)</i>
	Listening	<i>You have to listen to them and at the same time deliver what you have planned and at the same time deal with any disruption. (Student 2)</i>
	Building a rapport/relationship	<i>We seemed to build a rapport with them which was good. So, they all seemed to be able to talk to us eventually. In couple of sessions, they were a bit I don't like "who are these people". but after that they really opened up, so it was really good. (Student 4)</i>
Employability skills		<i>Yes, it did help in a way that it made me adapt to change which is a good skill. Like with kids' situations are unpredictable and they may change quite a lot. So, you learn to really go with the flow if you know what I mean. So, so many things at one time, if we can do it, which we did then certainly it's an employability skill, something we didn't know we could do before. (Student 1)</i>
	Team working	<i>teamwork was something we enjoyed a lot in this experience. Backing each</i>

		<i>other up. Planning together. Like the lesson delivery was although individual but still there was a lot going on. (Student 3)</i>
Overcoming challenges		<i>Yes, it was a new experience I think for all of us. We are used to just presenting in our classrooms which all goes according to the plan in a set time limit, but this was a bit I should say.... Mmmm unpredictable in a way that you don't really know what to expect but still you structure your lesson and see how it goes. (Student 2)</i>
	Confidence	<i>Yeah, because I suffer from general anxiety, so I was really nervous but after the first session I improved, and I felt better and more confident because probably when I was into it. It made me face it instead of hiding it. You know can't do it you know. I actually faced it and did it and now I feel more confident around children, so it was good. (Student 4)</i>
	Adaptable	<i>having the ability to adapt. I think it's something I really didn't know I had rather than having a fixed time set like this is how I'm gonna do it, it's rather flexible, it's like in the session that you saw, that bit in the end I did, it was only told just when I went there. So, you know</i>

		<p><i>having that ability to be spontaneous. And to work with what you've got. (Student 2)</i></p>
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Confidence

Engaging students in the design and delivery built their confidence and provided them with an experience outside of the university classroom setting, giving added value to the learning experience.

*But then I applied and then I thought I might as well try it and see it; I gained the skills and I liked delivering it in front of people before I wouldn't be able to do it. Before I was nervous. Before I would just hide away. Yeah, now I can just do it. And it's built confidence in me. It really gave me a lot of experience.
(Student 1)*

Students enjoyed being part of the design of this new and innovative module, helping to enhance the curriculum for future students. Through the engagement of students in their own learning this project enabled students to collaborate with both university and UCS staff in design and meeting the needs of the UCS students. This collaborative approach enabled the students to learn more about the process involved in curriculum development and design. Involving students this way enabled them to be fully engaged student partners. Previous work by the first author and colleagues put forward START (Support, Time, Adapt, Risks, Trust) as an approach to engage students as partners (Prescott, Cross and Iliff, 2020). The ethos of this approach was applied and expanded on in this project.

Applying skills

As well as this experience enhancing the overall learning experience of students, the project enabled students to gain some experience of applying counselling skills. Applying counselling skills is particularly important since students often find it difficult to gain experience outside of their classroom setting, as shown in the following quote, applying their learnt skills in a different setting can increase confidence in students and provide students with additional knowledge and competence.

Now I feel confident in using my counselling skills, like paraphrasing and building a rapport. I have an idea now; I can do this. My competency is not confidence. I feel I am confident anyways but now I feel more competent in that way. I can put that down as a skill, no problem. Feels like it's one of the things I got from it (Student 2).

yeah, I would say that it but my confidence and made me realise I can do it. It was enjoyable and also, we got to use the skills we learnt in our whole course. We could really apply those skills on kids Like rapport building, listening to them, etc. (Student 3)

Employability skills

Throughout the experience employability skills were considered a key benefit and an initial aim of the project for the university students.

Yeah as I mentioned it helped me get a job, so you know they have recognized it's a good skill and they gave me a chance so it's good for employability skills. (Student 2).

it was really good. Like I was telling the other day that I changed my whole career and everything I was doing before, and this experience was really something I learnt a lot from. We worked together as a team (Student 5)

Like I said dealing with a big group of this age was definitely a new experience and yes this can go in our CV as it gave me confidence that if I have to, I can do that again. (Student 1)

Reflections on the project

As programme lead (JP), I have learnt a lot from this initial pilot and the project is ongoing and has since been embedded in the curriculum for all students on the course. Co-creating curricula materials, meeting the needs of the students and the module requirements, was a rewarding experience. Project phoenix engaged students through a student partnership approach (Healey et al, 2014; Matthews, 2016). Upon reflection, the project was a success due to the commitment of the team at the University and the UCS. A strong collaboration is required for such a project to succeed, that needs buy in from all parties involved.

The key messages taken from this case study is that through the engagement the students built their confidence, they applied their counselling skills in a supportive and safe environment and finally they enhanced their employability skills. On reflection of the findings, the authors would therefore like to put forward the CASE approach to engagement. The CASE approach will hopefully provide readers with some insights into what is important and useful, and guide colleagues, when engaging students in a similar project.

The CASE approach:

Confidence- engagement builds confidence in students through the trust provided. Confidence was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews. This was evident from the feedback received through this project and engaging students on the design and delivery of the sessions.

Apply skills- in this case study the students were applying their counselling skills, however we posit that any skills can be applied through engagement and partnership building with students in the design and the delivery of module content and assessment. The students were teachers and counsellors facilitating their own learning through a teaching environment.

Supportive and safe environment- students were given an opportunity providing added value to their learning. Students were fully aware of the guidelines and boundaries enabling them to feel supported and safe in the learning environment.

Employability skills development- as third years it was deemed vital that the experience enable students to develop or enhance their employability skills. This opportunity provides students with the application of several employability skills.

Follow up and future plans.

As previously mentioned, due to the success of the project, the project is now fully embedded within the curriculum for all third-year undergraduate students studying the BSc Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling (PPC) course at the University. It was evident from the pilot study, presented here, that university students developed and applied several skills. Students engaged in curriculum development through a transparent process with clear learning outcomes and decision-making process as suggested by Matthews (2016). Skills such as teamwork, being adaptable, are evident through this project. Students find this challenging in terms of overcoming anxiety, nerves, because it is a new experience. It builds their confidence, and overall, it was, for all involved, an enjoyable experience and one in which students applied their learnt skills and knowledge.

Moving forward feedback from the students when asked about the challenges, it was clear smaller groups were needed as this was mentioned by all the 6 students as a challenge;

I thought it was good, I think may be smaller classes would have been better though. it was just too big I think. there were about 30 students in each class so I found it really difficult, but it was enjoyable, it was good that they all pulled together as a group. It was a good experience.

With one student feeling smaller groups would enable more application of counselling skills to facilitate more rapport and provide an environment where students feel comfortable and confident discussing issues in the classroom setting;

I think there should've been small groups. I think definitely. Like I said I feel I couldn't do as much as I wanted to. I think I could have built a relationship with probably some of them and be able to paraphrase more and do all the skills that we have learnt but because it was such a big group, there was no way I was gonna ask one kid to say something 'O can you tell me more?' (Student 1)

The sessions also need to be activity focussed;

Since there is a lot of information, it needs to be delivered in points like there were couple of sessions there was a lot of Information, and they get bored kind of a thing. It needs to be creative, and activity focussed. You need to be creative, that's the one thing I'd want to say. (Student 4)

All future PPC students will be required to design and deliver psycho-education sessions and we will work with the UCS to cover topics students need around anxiety, mental health, and social media use to guide the PPC students. However, the PPC students will still be responsible for the design and deliver of their own individually assessed session, providing a beneficial and engaging intervention under the guidance of qualified staff from counselling, psychology and safeguarding.

CONCLUSIONS

We have presented a case study outlining the aims and learning outcomes from a project aimed to engage and enhance the skills of counselling students on an undergraduate psychology course that engaged in a partnership to bring psychoeducation to a local school. Working in partnership with a local education provider has allowed a strong collaborative approach to develop, and the project continues to grow. Through the initial pilot supported by the University, a strong collaborative approach to delivering psychoeducation at the UCS has developed. The project has enhanced the curriculum for the university students on the BSc Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling pathway as well as the curriculum for year 11 students at the UCS. The journey was not without challenges. However, the challenges encountered have enabled further developments and each year we reflect on the process and continue to make improvements based on the students experience of both delivering and receiving the sessions. We hope by sharing this project that other similar projects can develop to increase mental health awareness, support students, engage students in design and delivery of interventions, curriculum development and develop partnerships.

Related publications and resources

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Appendix A: Example 1: Psycho-education sessions

Ice Breaker Session: The task was called 'GET A GRIP', students were asked to clasp their hands by interlocking their fingers. Then to take a note of which thumb is on top. Students were then asked to raise their hand if their left thumb was on top and then those with the right thumb on top. The task, "What feels natural for some may not feel natural for others". This was to highlight to the students how things may feel natural to use (the thumb that automatically is placed on top) maybe different for others. This was then discussed around the theme of perceptions. Students were then asked to clasp their hands again but with the other thumb on top. Followed by a conversation with students, how they feel etc. Therefore, thinking and changing the 'natural' response allows a different perspective. This was a demonstration to indicate that sometimes one has to change their thinking even if it seems unnatural in order to evaluate a situation in a different way.

GET A GRIP

Step 1 : Group was asked to interlock their fingers (Individual task)

Step 2 : They were asked to take a note of which thumb is on top?



Or



Step 3: Discussion topic: “What feels natural for some may not feel natural for another”

Step 4: Group was then asked to clasp their hands again but with the other thumb on top.

Step 5: Discussion: “Feelings around doing something unnatural to themselves?”

Step 6: Message: Sometimes one must change their thinking even if it seems unnatural in order to evaluate a situation in a different way.

Example 2: Psycho-education sessions

Session topic: Anxiety

The session started with a short and simple introduction to anxiety and what anxiety is? A YouTube video was used to present the concept of anxiety. Followed by, two activities were introduced to the class;

1. Anxiety Fortune Teller :

Students were given a list of coping strategies and discuss the strategies in partners. Students were asked to identify their top 8 coping strategies. Reminding them to choose activities that they think will help them personally. “It’s okay that everyone has different coping strategies!”

Students were handed the Coping Strategies Fortune Teller. They were then instructed to fill it in with colours and their top 8 coping strategies.

Downloadable link to Coping Strategies Fortune Teller :

<https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/109/04.02%20Navigating%20Emotions%20Activities%202.pdf>



Students were then asked to cut out their fortune tellers and use the directions to fold their craft. Once the Fortune Teller is ready, students practiced their coping strategies by playing with their fortune tellers in partners. Students were encouraged to read each other's coping strategies and practice.

Example 3: Psychoeducational Session

Followed by a discussion of uses of mindfulness practise in reducing exam stress and reorganising time and mind.

Smiling Mind App

Students were introduced to the freely available Smiling Mind App and discussed the benefits of daily practise of mindfulness activities. App includes daily meditation and mindfulness exercises which can be engaged using any device.