

Towards a deeper understanding of employer engagement in the context of young people's development of career management skills relevant for the 21st century

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This article will explore the pedagogy and outcomes leading to findings which support the theoretical underpinning of an employer engagement programme with young people, Step Up for Success (SU4S). This was possible as a result of an evaluative case study of a programme that occurred in partnership with a secondary school, a third party facilitator, a large international employer, and a careers professional acting as researcher. Central to the theme covered here is how the impact of the programme might relate to the learning of career management skills by the young people, which could have implications beyond this individual case study.

Introduction

The article aims to contribute to the greater academic understanding that Mann, Stanley & Archer (2014) highlight is needed in this area. They assert that although employer engagement with education has been the focus of various policies and practical initiatives since the 1970s, its impact is poorly understood. Mann et al. discuss what happens when young people in an educational setting come into contact with the business community. They argue that there is still more to be understood in this area but nevertheless draw out factors that contribute to success of activities such as '...matching of student and activity; timing; levels of support; volume of activities; duration; matching of activity to its objectives; resource for managing employer activity; and

preparation and the quality of input from employers' (Mann et al, 2014: 257). They also argue that by its very nature employer engagement in education implies a partnership and that deeper examination of the impact of different types of partnership on the outcomes for young people would be welcomed.

This article explores such a partnership and sheds light on several aspects touched on by Mann et al, including pedagogy and impact. It makes the case for a personalised approach, which benefits the young people, the employees and the organisation.

In late 2011, Tim Breedon, the serving CEO of FTSE 100 financial services company Legal & General (L&G), declared his company should actively respond to the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) exceeding one million. Consultations were held with Magnified Learning (ML), an existing supplier, which for several years had been training and coaching L&G employees through facilitation of in-school financial awareness days. This resulted in L&G commissioning ML to design and facilitate a NEET prevention programme, which L&G branded Step Up for Success (SU4S).

SU4S ran for two years, partnering with schools within easy travelling distance of L&G's offices in Cardiff, Surrey, and London. Participating L&G staff were released from their normal jobs to spend the entire week working in pairs and acting exclusively as managers and coaches to teams of five students. In total, almost 150 students from four schools and more than 60 L&G staff directly participated.

Each partner school was asked to identify a cohort of 30 Year 10 students adjudged capable of but at risk of not achieving five A-C grade GCSEs, the minimum threshold for educational progression. To help students have belief in their potential to achieve, their successful completion of the week's activities plus attendant reflection would lead to achievement of a bespoke four unit Level 2 award, entitled The Young Consultant Award. During twilight briefing sessions held for prospective participants at each school, students were told: 'If you can prove to yourself your ability to clear a Level 2 hurdle, all you have to do in Year 11 is develop your stamina to complete a whole circuit of the track.'

From the outset, L&G made clear that it was uninterested in a narrowly instrumental work experience programme aimed at recruiting young people into the financial services sector. Rather, it wanted to equip them with insights into the broader culture of corporate employment, together with greater self-confidence, self-awareness and raised aspirations for a fulfilling career.

To achieve this, Magnified Learning designed a programme to enable the students to conduct secondary and primary research and make reasoned recommendations to help shape L&G's thinking on substantive issues such as: how the company might make best use of social media and how it might develop its reputation as a leader in corporate responsibility. L&G was authentically keen to uncover the thoughts of young people on these issues and what transpired was in no sense a simulation.¹ Positioning the students as Young Consultants disrupted the often perfunctory and transmissive expressions of work-experience and, in keeping with co-operative learning (CL), promoted their role as that of both learner and teacher (Kearney, 2015). Moreover consideration for the CL conception of self-help which holds that, 'developing individual capacity and resilience...can be achieved only through purposeful co-operative engagement with others' (Rayment, 2011: 18) meant space was deliberately designed for L&G's participating employees to simultaneously learn through and from

their interactions with the young consultants and their own colleagues. This was critical since ML differs from other organisations working at the education/business interface, insofar as its core business is the design and management of corporate coaching programmes.

The employability attributes that SU4S aimed to develop in the young consultants had to be acquisitions, which, irrespective of career intentions, could be taken back into the classroom, and, which, with planned follow-up involving tutors and the mutual support of their SU4S peers, could be built upon to boost Year 11 performances.

With this purpose in mind, ML devised an SU4S Student Framework. This was informed by its experience of supporting schools and FE providers on Wider Key Skills, Personal Learning and Thinking Skills, and emotional intelligence, as well as by employer-led and economic frameworks such as SEMCOG's Lifelong Skills Framework (2012). Self Management headed this framework, reflecting its prominence in the joint CBI & NUS report (2011: 13) and echoing Duckworth and Seligman's observation that: 'A reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential [is] their failure to exercise self-discipline... Programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement' (2005: 944). The congruent co-operative learning (CL) value of self-help, noted above, also contributed to its prominence. The four remaining framework categories were: Engaging and Connecting; Standards; Reflecting and Innovating; and Communication.

Prior to their SU4S week each student completed an age-appropriate psychometric test derived from this framework. The test addressed the fact that for any group of learners barriers to achievement arise from multiple and complex factors. Its output allowed ML to share individual profiles with the relevant L&G managers.

The Student Framework resonated with aspects of L&G's in-house Six Behaviours Framework, which the company had begun rolling out in the months leading up to SU4S (L&G, Feb. 2012). Just as it was essential for the students to be able to transfer their learning to the classroom, it was essential that employees would be able to apply their own learning in relation to their behaviours framework back in their workplace roles. So mirroring the students' pre-programme

¹ Following recommendations for an online game presented to senior digital managers by Young Consultants in 2012, L&G reported: 'On 11th March 2013 we launched our very first game for smart phones and tablets. We've developed the game to connect our brand with a younger market whilst giving a light-hearted education into personal protection.' <http://media.panaceaadviser.com/main/st7918>

psychometric, each employee completed a self-assessment to identify areas for development across the six L&G areas of: Lead Like You Mean It; Take a Wider Interest; Set Higher Expectations; Take Informed Risks; Connect with Customers; and Take Ownership. Their development priorities were then shared before the week with their designated ML coach and personal development objectives were negotiated and, through their work with the young consultants, were the subjects of active experimentation during the week. The process aspired, then, to exemplify the CL principle that participants should be learning both with and from one another. However, as Kearney has noted, 'there is always a threat lurking in the background of it (CL) degenerating into a pooling of ignorance. This is where structure becomes God' (2015).

To guard against this, the programme was highly structured both in terms of content and pedagogy. Employees each undertook 1.5 days' training before meeting their teams of young consultants; students all attended a formal briefing plus a pre-week Meet the Managers session. The overriding objective of this session was for each student to meet with their two L&G managers for a 1:1 review of their student psychometric and to establish their specific areas for development over the programme. These development points would provide the focus for each student's daily 15-minute 1:1 performance review with their manager.

As theorist and practitioner Alan Wilkins observes CL is not only 'interactive and collective' but also 'by implication experiential' (2011: 7) and, throughout each day of the week, both sets of participants, managers and young consultants, systematically worked through several iterations of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, via concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1983). The constant presence of the managers during team activities facilitated informal and reactive intervention for individual young consultants to reflect on their performances, to assimilate through explanation and use of on-hand resources including video clips, on-line and printed materials, and to rapidly test this new learning through active experimentation.

In addition, each student's development points gave a personalised focus to their two managers' observations, which provided the substance of their daily 15-minute 1:1 performance review, with one or other of these managers. The structure of these

sessions closely mirrored the coaching sessions that ML coaches facilitated for the managers at the end of each day, and took their inspiration from Jacobson and Ruddy's five questions (2004). In this case the questions asked were variations of

- How do you feel? (reflection)
- What happened? (reflection on concrete experience)
- What was the consequence? (reflection)
- Why do you think things happened that way? (abstract conceptualisation)
- What will you do differently next time? (planning for active experimentation).

The significance of these sessions, and the programme's emphasis on self-awareness and on taking active responsibility for self-development, was reinforced on day one of the SU4S Week through the first element of the Young Consultant Award, 'Understand the Principles of Self-assessment in the Workplace.' This required students to:

- Describe why employers value individuals who know their strengths and areas for development;
- Describe existing personal strengths and give examples of times when they have demonstrated these;
- Describe which skills it is most important for them to develop and why.

The programme's personalisation hinged on the highly structured plan, which both sets of participants followed throughout the week (see Table 1). During this they shared in acclimatisation to unfamiliar situations (in the case of the managers, this was working with their team of young consultants); exploration and research of a genuine business problem, synthesising information, drawing conclusions and making workable recommendations. Each stage was accompanied by formal and informal spaces for experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. ML coaches were present throughout the week to observe the managers and to ensure that the plan was honoured. On day one and the morning of day two, ML coaches facilitated the process to promote co-operation and to initiate the research activities (see Table 1). This involved, for instance, a timed carousel to allow each student to interview 15 peers using questions generated in their

work teams under the guidance of their managers. The latter had been briefed to use the carousel to observe the inter-personal and communication skills of their team members. By Tuesday afternoon, ML's coaches stepped back to allow managers to take greater facilitation of the plan. At the same time, this carefully designed structure permitted managers to progressively loosen the reins on their young consultants, affording both sets of participants greater scope for personalised active experimentation.

Table 1

Pre-SU4S Week				
Employee Briefing to share planned outcomes for students and employees, and introduce employee self-assessment (2 hrs).				
Employee Training to share structure and roles and responsibilities (1 day participative workshop)				
Student, Parent/Carer Briefing to share planned outcomes for students and employees; psychometric (90 mins twilight).				
Meet the Managers to familiarise, agree team protocols, and agree personalised development priorities. (90 mins twilight).				

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Welcome	Client Brief	Team Meeting	Team Meeting	Preparation
Introductory meetings – young consultants & managers	Young consultants' research brief from L&G client	Preparation to conduct interviews with key L&G staff	Preparation to build team business presentations	Preparation to build team business presentations
Finance Game	Research Carousel	Interview Carousel	Presentation Prep	Presentations
Managers observe consultant teams as they play a game explaining the key purpose of the finance sector	Young consultants' primary research	Young consultants interview senior staff	Teams confirm 5 business recommendations for the L&G client and build their presentations.	Teams deliver their final presentations to the L&G client in front of managers, parents / carers / teachers
	Research Questions	Data Analysis		
Young consultants analyse research	Young consultants analyse research	Young consultants analyse research		
Team Presentations to Managers	Teams' Interview Preparation	Teams' Business Ideas Creation	Teams Create Business Presentations	
1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1
Young consultants individually coached by managers	Young consultants individually coached by managers	Young consultants individually coached by managers	Young consultants individually coached by managers	Young consultants individually review their performance with managers
Manager Coaching	Manager Coaching	Manager Coaching	Manager Coaching	Manager Coaching
Managers engage in group coaching reflection and planning session	Managers engage in group coaching reflection and planning session	Managers engage in group coaching reflection and planning session	Managers engage in group coaching reflection and planning session	Managers engage in group coaching performance review session

Post-SU4S Week				
Handover Event for team presentations to summarise collective and individual learning; young consultant, manager and tutor triads (90 mins).				
Employee Coaching Conversations (1:1) to review learning and set objectives for learning transfer; completion of professional development plans (PDP) - 1 hour per call plus subsequent PDP write-up time.				

Key: **— —** Informal and reactive intervention to aid reflection, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation.
 Formally structured space for reflection and abstract conceptualisation.

The accent on personalisation meant that student objectives were varied. One student's psychometric scores (identified as Lucas) indicated that Engaging and Connecting was an area requiring significant development for him. This was confirmed by his concrete experiences of day one, after which, in his 1:1 he reflected and recorded in his Learning Journal that, 'I have learned that I need to get involved more in activities.' Abstract conceptualisation led him to reflect on his behaviour in relation to a taxonomy, which the young consultants had worked with earlier in the day. Lucas concluded that, 'I'm a Balancer... As an employee most of the time... I would mostly keep it safe.' His planning for active experimentation saw him commit to 'Involve myself more; speak up more. Throw out ideas; righting (sic) notes/bit of a push to speak up more.' On day two, he was observed by his managers doing this by making a phone call to an unfamiliar L&G employee to arrange a subsequent research interview for his work team. In his 1:1 at the end of day three, he was engaging in the following active experimentation: 'Listen thoroughly; checking understanding; commit to the task/focus on it./ Explain tasks more; reape (sic) tasks when asked.' By day four, Lucas was demonstrating high levels of engagement and satisfaction with his ability to connect, and was able to reflect, 'I learnt how to speak loud and clear so everybody will here (sic) me,' an observation confirmed by his subsequent proficient presentation on day five to an audience of over 100 adults and young people.

Another student's key development point (identified as Claire) arising from her concrete experiences of days one and two was to get her points across more persuasively. On day three, she actively experimented with this and was formally observed leading an interview with an unfamiliar senior manager. During her day three 1:1, she reflected that before the interview, 'I felt nervous in case I messed up my words,' but that she was, 'Relieved it was done, it went better than I thought.' Abstract conceptualisation came in the form of guidance and discussion about techniques for improved persuasiveness from the manager. Plans for active experimentation for day four included additional, 'Work on presenting and persuading/Support in persuasion and presenting techniques.' This active experimentation was enacted and observed in the context of preparation for her formal presentation on day five.

The week concluded with a manager-led team coaching session for the Young Consultants and a ML led team-coaching for the managers. Students saw their managers for one last time in the following week when, at an in-school handover event, their managers had triad meetings with each Young Consultant and their tutor to share learning and agree learning transfer objectives for the coming year. The managers each participated in a follow-up 1:1 coaching session and agreed a professional development plan to cement learning in their workplace roles.

The final sections of this article cover student feedback and impact of the SU4S programme. We explored:

- What impact did the SU4S programme have for the young people who took part in it?
- How and what did the young people feel they learnt?

Three young people, a 10% sample from one of the cohorts, were interviewed in depth three months after the programme. They were asked about how they felt they had learnt whilst on SU4S, particularly what had been significant at the time and what had happened in the intervening months. The interview transcripts were then analysed.

In summary, the findings were as follows:

- Different primary learning methods had been employed by each individual
- All the young people indicated that relationships they had built, and work they had done with others, had been significant
- The young people all identified changes over a time period
- For each individual, there had been something that caused them a difficulty or made them uncomfortable during SU4S which, following the programme, appeared to be less of a problem.

The students were very clear about which primary learning methods had worked for them during the programme. As these were different in all three cases, it was not felt that these in particular accounted for the collective experiences they articulated at the time of the programme completion or that they had gone on to have in the intervening months. In order, therefore, to understand the significance of the

Table 2

1.	2. Before	3. Issue	4. After SU4S
Sophie	Is very concerned about what people think about her and her ideas.	She doesn't engage in conversations readily and won't put herself in situations where she is likely to have to make the first move, e.g. college open events.	Has discovered through trying it elsewhere that she gets lots out of talking to people and engaging in conversation.
Andrew	Thinks that you can't take responsibility or be in a position of responsibility and have fun as well.	He doesn't listen to instructions in his position of responsibility and therefore can't perform well. He gets frustrated when he gets into trouble and this reaffirms his belief that being responsible is no fun.	Has found taking responsibility more fun and stimulating than he realised. Actively looking for other opportunities now.
Ralph	Is stubborn and won't listen to constructive criticism as he deems it to be interference.	Finds quite a lot of things difficult but is wary of being around adults so no one ever notices that he needs help.	Has felt good at achieving things he found difficult and recognising that putting himself in a position to accept help was part of the key for him.

(Walling, 2013)

learning, the common aspects were explored in more detail as it was felt that these in particular had the potential to shed light on the wider interest in the development of career management skills.

One measure used for determining whether taking part in SU4S helped the individuals develop appropriate career management skills was to look at the three month time period between the programme and the research interviews. The findings are illustrated in Table 2.

The table illustrates each individual's macro journey through the Kolb learning cycle as illuminated through the interview process. It is described as macro because there was also evidence of a journey at a micro level as each individual improved their performance of the technical tasks they were undertaking, such as giving presentations and making phone calls throughout the week. The macro journey charts the process over a longer time frame. The concrete experience was SU4S itself and Column 3 is the abstract conceptualisation that they have been able to articulate through

observing and reflecting (Column 2) on their experiences before and during SU4S. In Column 4, their experiences during the whole of the SU4S week are taken together as active experimentation showing that they approach their next learning experience more self-aware and are therefore more likely to benefit positively from it.

By getting closer to Sophie's experiences after SU4S it is possible to see this in practice as she moves into other situations. After SU4S finished, whilst on a family holiday, Sophie took the opportunity to practise talking to new people. She was surprised to find she enjoyed the experience and made more friends than she would normally. Here, Sophie is actively experimenting in a different setting and finding that she can still achieve things outside the very supportive environment of SU4S. This increases her confidence to apply her new learning to the school environment and she reports that she is putting up her hand more in lessons. Through doing this, Sophie experiences another new learning cycle as she finds the results of putting up her hand are more rewarding than previously as she

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realises that she learns something through doing that even if the answer is wrong at first.

So what did Sophie do next? The pattern of active experimentation continued, for example, at a careers fair she was more prepared than previously to engage with college representatives. Reflecting on this, she was surprised to find the conversations had been rewarding. Again, understanding this in abstract terms appeared to allow her to transfer the experience to yet another situation at her college interview where the outcome of course choice was more positive and appropriate than might otherwise have been.

The journey of Sophie, Andrew and Ralph through SU4S and onwards was not a journey that they were undertaking alone. What was significant from all their stories is the importance of collaborating with others on the programme, both adults and peers. This cooperative learning and particularly the significance of 'mutual self help' (Wilkins, 2011: 9) is illustrated when Sophie is not only praised by one of the managers about a piece of her work but asked if it could be used for future staff development within the company. Back at school, Sophie reports that she feels that she gains more from relationships with teachers as she begins to work more collaboratively with them.

All three young people interviewed talked about their SU4S learning experience in terms of life-changing moments for them. This was strongly linked to their feeling of commitment towards their team whilst on SU4S and how this supported their desire to succeed at things they found difficult. All 30 young people involved felt a sense of shared history which they took back into school and which enabled them to know and feel comfortable around a wider number of individuals. It had broadened their network.

In reviewing the impact of the programme the young people were questioned about their behaviour and attitudes to learning before and after the programme. All students reported feeling more confident at particular task related outcomes (micro outcomes). However, not all students identified significant changes in their learning behaviour or undertaking new activities as a result of their experiences (macro outcomes) in the way that Sophie, Andrew and Ralph reported.

There could be many reasons why the young people might report different levels of behaviour in this context. It might relate to individual comfort levels going back into the school situation or differing maturity levels in terms of ability to move from a micro to a macro level of application. It may also have been influenced by the levels of access to further opportunities that the individual young people had been exposed to between completing SU4S and the time of the questionnaire. Whether there will eventually be some evidence of macro application for all individuals through taking part in SU4S is unclear and only a longitudinal study would illuminate this further.

Conclusion

It is perhaps this macro application of learning developed through SU4S that is of most interest to the overall question of the acquisition of career management skills useful for the 21st century. The story does not end there, though, as work is still ongoing to improve evaluative techniques in relation to understanding educational outcomes from the programme. There are likely to be other employers interested in this approach and other situations where such learning is happening or is possible and it is hoped that the experience of SU4S will further stimulate debate and research in this area.

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