Interviewed by Maria Smith 9th July 2012.

Lynne Spackman, Senior lecturer in Psychology discusses the advantages of using the Venture Matrix in a project management module. She reflects on the successes of the module, in particular how it brings independence and responsibility to the students as well talking about some of the problems that have occurred.

In general, how do you use the Venture Matrix?

The sorts of projects that we look for, we liaise with Venture Matrix to try and come up with a number of projects that would be suitable for these sorts of students. We are not prescriptive to just psychology because a lot of our students, only about 20% actually go into psychology, a lot of them end up looking much wider. So we actually use Venture Matrix as an idea, as a way of introducing them to alternatives for the students who may not become clinical psychologists but want to see what other options they might have.

How do you structure your Venture Matrix projects?

We tend to structure it as, we sell it very much as an autonomous learning from the outset, we tell students that essentially they will be in charge of their own projects and we give them a lot of time to do that but within that we also have regular workshops to try and give them project management skills. We teach them about employability skills in one workshop, we teach them how to do a project management proposal so one of the tasks that they have to do as part of their assessment is to do a presentation of their proposal so that we know that they have a viable project. It also gives them an opportunity to sell the project as if they were trying to sell the project to a stakeholder.

So we also start to introduce them to some of the language such as stakeholder, project proposal and these sorts of thing so they are not as intimidated and other types of workshop will include how to do team work, how to manage a project, time and that sort of thing so that they have the tools and we do this quite early on in the project so that they have the tools that they need to get started.

What is the role of the Venture Matrix?

Venture Matrix has been a vital part in helping us set up the projects for the students. They provide a lot of external support as a lot students are interested in doing projects outside with external clients. So we have been working with schools, we have been working with a marketing company, as a couple of examples and Venture Matrix has been vital in making the initial contacts and also for providing a kind of structure to a lot of the meetings so the students have been using the Venture Matrix staff for setting up the meetings and to provide them with venues, such as the Trade Fairs where they can start to make contacts and gain help from other bodies in completing. So to be honest they are an absolute Godsend in that aspect of things. It means we don't have to worry about the liabilities because quite frankly as academics we might not be strongest in managing business relationships so they have taken over that role and have helped the students along.

Has it been successful?
We have had very successful projects. We are still in the very early stages, we have only been running this for about three years and I’ve only had about three different groups or four different groups go through it so we have really been in the developmental but it has been extremely successful. All the feedback from the students who have done the Venture Matrix project have got a lot out of it, they have worked very, very hard, they have really engaged well with it, which I think has been down to some of the Venture Matrix staff who have really emphasised the importance of this. We’ve had some very successful and really good feedback from the clients that they have worked with so we are hoping to expand this and get more students taking it.

**Have you had any problems?**

On the Venture Matrix side a few, but not a whole lot to be frankly honest, it’s been more to do with group dynamics because the students have had to work within a group. Because of the nature of this, we have always encouraged them to work it out themselves. They are not assessed as a group so that kind of takes away that pressure but they have to learn how to manage a group and the group dynamics and I think that is an important part of these sorts of projects, so we have occasionally run into those sorts of issues but on the whole the students have managed to work it out when they have realised that we are not going to step in and do it for them.

Give them support and guidance on how to do it but we are not going to tell one student to pack it in or anything like that. It’s up to them to manage it and we set up the expectation from the beginning that that is going to be the case and most of the students have risen to the challenge.

**In what ways do the students benefit?**

I think they have gotten more used to working in a group, team work. And they've gained, the success or failure of a project they are not relating it to academic achievement, they are starting to relate it to a responsibility towards a client because whether or not the project is successful or not, really it doesn't always depend on what the mark will be. In this case they are taking ownership of a project and doing it out of a sense of responsibility that they have to complete something. And something that is beyond that and I think that is really important for a lot of the students because they stop thinking just in academic terms and what mark am I going to get but in the larger sense which is what they have to do when they start to go out into a more employment environment. That is one thing that they really gain.

They also gain a lot of confidence, the students realise that they can go out into this environment and be successful on the whole. They learn how to relate to older people who are not tutors, who are working, they are relating to people who are the boss and they have a certain responsibility for setting their own timeline and things and realising that it is not just their mark that is changing on it but the rest of the group and their client. So I think they gain a lot of confidence from that aspect.

And finally, they gain a great deal of employability skills and experience that they can use and we teach them towards the end of the project, we then get them to reflect and we talk about how they
can use these skills within interviews and on CVs and that really also bolsters confidence and ability to start to think about what sorts of skills they are gaining and how to apply them beyond university.

Is there a type of student that it suits more?

I think it brings out different skills. Most, I think the ones that take part in this and at our stage it is elective and it isn’t necessarily been the academic high flyers that have always chosen this, it has always been the ones who have been more aware of what they are going to do when they leave university. It does often include the academic high flyers but also the ones who take responsibility for their own actions, more autonomous learners and I think they are the ones who do better in this environment than the ones who are more likely to coast or who need a lot more support.

The ones who need a lot more support tend to do more poorly because the teams get frustrated with them and we’ve had a couple of those. The teams get very frustrated with them, they get frustrated because their tutor keeps going back and saying ‘well no, there is nothing I can do, this is your project, I don't know about it, you have to do it, you have to work with your team.’ And they don’t do as well and I think they also don’t do as well in the assessment because they tend to struggle with the insight on the reflective aspects.

Our assessment is very much a reflective aspect of looking at how they can apply their skills and they struggle a bit more with that. Having said that, some of them, when they realise they can’t rely on their tutor to tell them what to do because the tutor doesn’t always have answers, it’s their project, they don’t know enough about it, so when they realise that they start to take ownership, so some of them actually step up and do a lot better than you would think they might at the beginning. Things work out, a little. I think that the ones who are autonomous learners will do very well and they tend to get a lot out it, the other groups tend to struggle a bit more.

What we tend to do during our development of the module is we have added more support sessions. First we were quite keen on just letting them go and seeing how it worked and for a large percentage of them that did very well but there was always some of them who needed the structure, me coming in and saying ‘are we actually doing this right?’ even if it was just a tutor to talk to, that tended to shift things towards a more positive outcome than the getting frustrated and just writing the whole thing off. So we did find that we did needed to find, not necessarily giving them the information but somewhere where they could say 'is this right' and you say 'what do you think?'. Then talking it through and they usually are on the right track.

How do you encourage the students to reflect on their experiences?

What we do is we get them to keep specifically trying so within the workshops, we specifically set them up to get them to start to see how employability skills map onto their experiences which is essentially what we are trying to do with reflection, is to look at and start to think about that. We then also have an entire workshop on reflective practice, talking about what reflective practice is and how it directly applies to this experience but we do try and put it into showing them that reflective practice isn’t just an airy fairy ideal, it’s not like 'I did this and I felt this and that’ but more
along the lines of how reflective practice then lets you put the information down on a CV or how you can use that information directly in an interview. So we try to make it less of the airy fairy stuff they get in some places and more this is how you use the reflective practice and we do that quite deliberately.

**Do you use any theoretical frameworks?**

We have admittedly avoided too much of the theoretical side, but these students, I know with some groups, we are setting up a psychology / sociology joint project management and we will probably incorporate a wee bit more because those students, especially those taking with sociology tend to like that more, the theoretical framework. We haven't with this group, we have focussed very, very much on practical 'how to' so not what informed the development of what makes up a project proposal but more touching on that. We also pull in, we tend to pull the psychology stuff; the psychology of group work, the psychology of marketing because that is what a project proposal is, it is actually trying to sell something. So if we are going to do that, we do the more consumer and workplace psychology as a framework rather than the business because I do know there is a whole literature on the business side of project management but I think our students would not engage with that very well at all, they are not interested.

**Can you give me some examples of Venture Matrix projects?**

For example, two of our projects have actually been very similar, they've been working with schools in developing, the schools run a project at senior level - a business initiative and they get students to start their own businesses, they give them a certain stake of money and then what they have to do is start their own business and to try to make money. It's a competition to see who can make the most money and have the best project. What the schools have done is brought in our team to help some of the groups that are selling to improve their presentation skills and confidence so our students were asked to set up workshops, some on how to improve presentation skills, some of the workshops were on self esteem and team work, group work.

So the students had to set up and design these workshops and then go out to the schools and give them to the students. It has worked amazingly well and what has been interesting is that as different groups have designed different workshops for the different years and they keep asking us to come back because they do such a good job. So the students who have taken them on board have found that where before they weren't getting students from the under-performing high schools doing very well in the competition, after being given the workshops, several of the schools have had entrants into the finals. So we are getting really good direct feedback and that has been really good for the students because they have seen that they have made a direct and measurable impact from their project so that has been a really, really positive and one which we are hoping to keep going. They have asked us to try and keep going because it has been so good.

Another project which one of our students did, they worked with a marketing company who are trying to sell psychometric testing. This was an interesting project because the students really didn't buy into the product very well. Being psychology students they weren't quite sure of the utility of it but they adapted and realised this is marketing, this is what the client wanted so they needed then to figure out how then to sell this product and it was really interesting because they had a really good relationship with the client so they were able give comment on some of the clients ideas and
they learnt to do this in a non-confrontational way, so I thought it was very effective along those lines. And they were also able to take the clients, from some of their own initiative they came up with some ideas for the client which the client liked and they were able to take them forward. So they set up a website, twitter accounts, they were able to help them market it to a different age group than they originally thought. They even designed a DVD for them which the client was so impressed with that they are taking out to use as part of the marketing strategy so the feedback from the client was extremely positive too

**Have you encountered any ethical problems?**

Occasionally, some of it was, there was some discussion on whether or not you approve of a product should you sell it, that one came from through. There was also some ethical issues around the students meetings and student protection, I think though that was possibly a little less ethical and more insurance based because they go out and meet the clients along those lines but luckily enough most of our projects have been fairly straightforward. Some of the things that we have run into, one of the students set up as part of their teaching material, set up a dragon’s den type and there was some issues of whether or not you can steal format, and how closely a format on an obviously a copyrighted show can be used within the educational material so there was some consideration of those issues and it was decided that nobody at dragon’s den wouldn’t get particularly upset but these are the sorts of things that they start to look at. We also introduce ethics just as a general part of our workshop so we talk about an awareness of ethical issues, what to do if you are asked to do something which you didn't think was ethical so thankfully our projects have been free of that but we do actually deliberately bring those sorts of issues in as part of the training and kind of talk a more about the business ethics because they get quite about clinical ethics and research ethics and we start to talk about how some of those might feed into some of the business and project related type things.

**Have you any other comments to make about the Venture Matrix?**

One thing that is important sometimes is addressing the students themselves. Venture Matrix started off with very business orientation because it started off in the business school, took on students from that, it had very much that sort of feel to it. Now they have been doing a lot to try and incorporate other areas into it but they still come to it from very business point of view and I think this effects our students a bit because they get very intimidated by business. Our students are not business students, they don’t think business, they don't think from that perspective at all. Most of them come in with either very high ideologies about wanting to help people or with an interest in psychological disorders and when they have to start to think about the business side or the money side of things and the project management they get very, very intimidated and a lot of students start off very scared. Venture Matrix has gotten a bit better at setting up their sites and the projects that might be more of interest to them but there is still always a bit of intimidation. Our students start off not really knowing what they are getting into and being intimidated by the whole thing, even trade fairs, some of students find the whole concept alien.

So I think you have to put in a lot of work talking to them about what do we expect, that they aren't expected to be business people but these sorts of skills and I think you have to manage a lot of the
expectations especially at the beginning, once they get into the project and they realise that they have good ideas and they can do it, you just step back and they go and do a great job. But I think at the beginning there is a lot and I think you need to recognise that especially for non business and non that side of things students.