CASE STUDY:

ROBERT'S JOURNEY

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Title

Robert's Journey

Competence

IAG Competence: Information and communication technologies. This involves competent use of various media: telephone and video communication; e-mail and messaging; access to Internet for resources; and use of the Internet for interactions.

DigComp areas: Communication and collaboration & Digital content creation

Abstract/Introduction/Background

This story portrays the trials and tribulations of Robert (an experienced guidance practitioner) working with 18–24-year-olds on an employability project in London. Robert is working on a face-to-face basis with his clients, he then has to undertake a complete shift in practice and focus with the young people due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic. This is a story of his journey of self-exploration, introspection and ultimately understanding of what works best and how to still achieve credible outcomes despite having to face adversity.

Key Words

- Communication
- Digital Media
- Social Action
- Employability
- Technology

Key Characters

Robert – Guidance Practitioner. Lead on the Ready 4 Work programme. Robert has been a guidance practitioner for some time and has years of experience. He is adept at facilitating group work with young people, helping them overcome barriers and engaging them with employment. However, Robert has never had to use technology to engage young people.

Robert's wife (Julia) – Julia is a creative art professional. She is extremely sensitive to her husband's needs and is always there to lend a listening ear, or happy to come with a solution. She is proud of Robert's achievements and wishes him success in all his endeavours.

Robert's group of young people – These young people all live in a youth hostel. Their official status would be homeless. There are a multitude of reasons why these young people have had to live in the youth hostel. For some it is family relationship breakdown. For some it is mental health issues. For others it is the inability of them to find suitable private rented accommodation. They also have different barriers and issues that they are trying to overcome. Robert is only one person in a list of professionals that many of them have to deal with.

The Case Study Story

Aimed at moving young people into employment across Sectors, the Ready 4 Work programme supports 18–24 year-olds who are currently not in employment, education or training. Providing them with a tailored programme of support, practical training and job search skills, the program enables them to access sustained employment or education. A key element of this programme is the development of participant led Social Action Projects, supported by Business Mentors, which will allow young people to explore issues which they feel passionate about, whilst simultaneously learning new skills and recognising and building on their strengths. The Social Action Project is an important element of the Ready 4 Work programme and allows learners to develop a wide range of transferable skills that will assist them in their progression towards fulfilling and sustainable employment. Designed

collaboratively by learners, Employer Mentors and trained advisors, Social Action Projects provide young people with an opportunity to develop creative initiatives which focus on subjects which are of particular concern and interest and impact on their local community directly.

Robert has spent the last 6 weeks working with the young people on their soft skills. He has been running face-to-face workshops with the scope of improving the young people's view of themselves, identifying barriers in individuals, providing strategies and solutions for them and preparing them to enter employment. He has to also prepare the young people to participate in their social action project. Robert understands that the cohort that he has are challenging, they come from a deprived area in London and are all living in a youth hostel. This brings unique challenges, many of the young people are guarded in how they interact with other adults. It has taken Robert some time to be able to gain their trust. He has been attending the youth Hostel 2 days per week to facilitate the running of workshops. This has shown the young people that he is invested in them and is consistent in his approach of support and guidance of them throughout the project.

After holding a mind mapping workshop, the young people have decided that they would like to do a social action project on food poverty. They have identified a local homeless shelter and have agreed to volunteer there, helping to feed the homeless residents of the shelter. They have also decided to approach local businesses and ask for donations to go to the homeless shelter. Robert has the young people draft letters and make phone calls to businesses in the local area. There has been a really good response to the young people's hard work and a number of businesses have agreed to donate to the food poverty social action project.

Robert has planned to also showcase the young people's hard work by having a celebration event at the end of the project. Everything seems to be going well when a cataclysmic event occurs. Robert receives a call from his manager who informs him that face to face work will cease with the young people due to the country going into lockdown for the Coronavirus pandemic and that until further notice Robert will have to work from home. His manager also informs him that the work with the young people will continue and they will still have to complete the social action project.

This news sends Robert into a tailspin. Not only will he have to find a way to engage the young people without physically seeing them, but he also learns that no one who is not from the homeless shelter will be able to volunteer there for some time. This news devastates Robert as he has spent the last few weeks preparing the young people for their food poverty social action project. When Robert goes home, he speaks with his wife. He tells her that he will have to find a new way of working with the young people in a remote way, he also tells her that he feels like he won't be able to complete the social action project and give the young people the support that they deserve. His wife assures him that all will be well, and she is sure that he will find a solution to his current problems. Robert doesn't sleep well that night, he's completely restless and worried for the future as he really does not know what to do. He ponders the question "How do I work with these young people remotely without seeing them one face to face?". It has been hard enough working through the issues on a week-to-week basis delivering workshops and supporting them on a one-to-one basis.

The next day Robert realises that he will really have to strategize and come up with a plan to get through the months ahead. Not only has he got to prepare the young people for employment, he also needs to complete a social action project with them. He needs a plan and he needs a plan quickly! Robert decides to approach his manager as he feels that it is important to find a way to contact all of the young people within the youth hostel. Robert realises that not all of them have laptops or phones with data allowance to use the internet. Robert tells his manager that they will need to find a way to loan or provide technologies to these young people, so that they are able to engage fully in the project and to continue the work that has been done with them so far.

Robert's manager comes back to him and explains that they have been fortunate enough to receive funding from a local government body to purchase laptops and tablets for the young people. Robert receives this information with joy, as he feels in this moment that there has been a significant breakthrough and he will indeed be able to continue working with young people in a consistent way. However, this throws up a new question for Robert. He has never used technology in this way before as all the work he has done with young people has been on a face-to-face basis. How will the use of this technology change the way that the young people interact with Robert and the way that they engage with the project. This is a serious concern to Robert. He also is concerned whether the young people will be able to use the technology appropriately and engage with it in a significant way to complete the social action

project. When Robert goes home, he speaks with his wife about this, he muses with her about the use of digital media. Can he give the same support to the young people in an online room? Can he make sure he keeps control of the conversation? Will the young people feel safe during the sessions? His wife tells him that he can use break out rooms (on Zoom or Microsoft Teams) to talk to the young people 1:1 if he needs to. Robert is so lucky that his wife is in the creative industries, she always has great ideas! Robert also thinks that he should approach his manager and ask for a second person online. Robert quickly dismisses the idea as he does not want to appear to be struggling and he also has a high level of professional pride.

The first thing Robert realises that he needs to do is to call a meeting with young people and ask them their views on the new situation, how it has made them feel and how confident they feel in using technology to still be able to access him and the project. Robert calls all of the young people on the phone and informs them that he has laptops and tablets that he will be distributing to each and every one of them. He also asks them what is their preferred way of being contacted. Many of the young people tell Robert that they would prefer to use a social media platform to hold meetings, have conversations and to create group chats. The platform or app that the young people have chosen is WhatsApp. For Robert this will be a new journey of exploration as previously he had little experience in the world of online social media as the majority of his work would usually take place face to face.

Robert holds his first ever WhatsApp group meeting online. He holds three meetings with 7 young people on each call, this is a brand new experience as Robert realises it very different coordinating all of these young people on an online forum. Despite his worries the meeting is a massive success, the young people are really happy that they will be receiving laptops and all tablets to still be able to engage in the project. Robert is also able to obtain data dongles for the young people to ensure those with no Internet data still have access to the Internet.

Over the course of the next week laptops, tablets and data dongle sticks are delivered to the young people in the youth hostel. Robert also realises that he will have to have a session with the young people just on the appropriate use of technology and Netiquette: the way that they engage with each other online. This was something that previously he did not have to do and did not consider the importance of during the project. Also, Robert ponders how he will still be able to make the young people feel that they are being individually supported even though he is unable to see them face to face.

To add the level of personalisation, Robert decides to ensure that he speaks to each young person on a one-to-one basis at least once per week. Robert uses live video calling on WhatsApp to speak to each of the young people. He insists that young people use that camera on their phone as he feels that the fact that they can see each other is more beneficial then just a mere phone call. However, there are times when the only way he can get through to young people is to call them. Sometimes some contact is better than none.

Some of the young people inform Robert that they will not be doing the Social Action Project. They say that as Robert is unable to come to them in the youth hostel, they are not prepared to have to log on and to attend meetings online. Robert feels as though this may be due to their low academic levels and inability to use technology. This concerns Robert as he wants to give all of the young people as high a level of support that he can. He decides to speak with the Managers at the hostel and one of the young people's key workers to let them know of the situation and to ask for their help in engaging those that are struggling.

Robert holds his second full online meeting on WhatsApp a week later. The focus of this workshop with the young people is now to decide how they can complete a social action project without being able to be in the local community, as they are unable to complete their food poverty project. Some of the young people start to talk about the experiences that they have had being stuck in the youth hostel and how this has made them feel. Robert then has a brain wave: if he can get the young people to think in a more positive way of the experiences that they have had whilst stuck in the youth hostel, this can be used to empower other young people who are going through similar types of experiences. Robert just needs to find a way or medium to carry out this idea.

That night Robert speaks to his wife. He talks to her about the project and the fact that he really needs to find a way of engaging the young people in a social action project being done remotely. As his wife is in the creative arts industry, she suggests to him: "Why not make a film?". Robert does a dance of joy in the living room. He thanks his wife and gets to planning. If he can get each of the young people to film themselves, then he can support them to collate and edit all of the footage and make it into a short film about social isolation and strategies that young people have used to overcome this isolation.

Over the course of the coming days and weeks Robert holds numerous online meetings with the young people not only using WhatsApp but introducing Zoom and Microsoft Teams

sessions as well. He realises that this will also improve their technological intelligence and bolster their confidence in how they use technology.

Robert gives out different roles to different young people. All of the them will have a one-minute slot allocated in the film. They will all have to talk about a set of questions Robert has devised. Some of the young people express to Robert that they do not feel confident being on camera or speaking in a direct way. To address this Robert has many workshops all centred around communication and bit by bit the young people that were initially sceptical with participating in the video end up being happy to be shot and to speak with confidence.

Another challenge Robert faces is that young people are all indoors in the youth hostel. He worries that the film will be lacklustre due to the fact of a lack of outdoor scenes. On the WhatsApp call to some of the young people one of them mentioned to Robert why don't they use the communal garden and the studio that is in the basement of the youth hostel. Robert thinks that this is a fantastic idea and he's happy that the young people are also problem solving.

Roberts spends a lot of his time in the coming weeks collating all of the material that the young people have sent to him via email and via WhatsApp. Robert did not know how time consuming that this would all be, again this has all been a massive learning curve for him as he has not been in this situation before, having to use technology in a new way.

The film is edited and distributed to all of the participants and stakeholders within the project. Robert completes a short evaluative workshop with the young people asking them to reflect on their experiences and how technology played a major role in their being able to continue the project and engage with each other. The feedback from the young people was overwhelmingly positive. Some commented favourably about how Robert had procured technology for them, gave them workshops on how to use the technology appropriately and that his continuing support throughout had been a significant factor in their being able to deal with a difficult situation.

Robert also understands that he has had to adapt a blended approach to the young people's learning and engagement within the project and completing their social action. He has had to use a high level of discernment and introspection into his own practise and motivation whilst on this project. It has not been an easy ride at all….

Questions, comments and topics of discussion

1. What would you have done in Robert's position if you had to work remotely with your client group?
2. Would you feel that you are able to give your clients the same level of support online. As opposed to face to face?
3. What else could Robert have done if the group had never met each other before going online, especially considering issues around engaging individuals and helping them bond purely online.
4. Why did Robert feel he needed to speak to his wife - where were his colleagues? Why do you think that he did not use his manager for support?
5. After reading the story, in your role would you need digital training or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to meet your clients' needs in a changing landscape?