Bridging Theory and Practice: The Chat Club's Influence on Football Studies Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of The Chat Club, an online event series integrated into the BSc Football Studies course at Solent University. Designed to enhance student learning, The Chat Club facilitates interactions with professional football staff globally through interactive sessions. The study explores the event structure, diversity of guest speakers, and outcomes based on student testimonials and relevant research on online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives. Hosting 34 events with 39 guest speakers, topics ranged from biomechanics to coaching strategies, bridging theoretical knowledge with practical insights. Student feedback highlighted networking opportunities, practical relevance, and enhanced engagement. The initiative supports an inclusive curriculum, fostering diverse role models and equitable learning environments. Findings suggest online CPD events like The Chat Club complement traditional teaching methods by offering flexibility, broader participation, and engaging learning experiences. The integration of professional insights with academic content promotes holistic learning, preparing students for real-world challenges and aligning with experiential and constructivist educational theories. However, challenges such as ensuring consistent participation and managing technological barriers need to be addressed. The paper concludes that The Chat Club significantly enhances the educational experience for BSc Football Studies students and offers a viable framework for future educational initiatives in higher education.

Keywords: Online Learning; Professional Development; Interactive Education; Student Engagement; Higher Education

Introduction

In the United Kingdom and across Europe more widely, higher education has witnessed an increasingly performative culture which has led to an expectation that higher education programs should "intellectually stimulate learning whilst also fostering student employability development" [1]. In their analysis of the discourses of teaching excellence, Burke et al (2015) [2] identified the phases: 'holistic learning', 'creating independent learners', 'providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities', 'employability', 'developing skills', 'student engagement' and 'student-centered teaching'. This has implications for higher education institutions and academic teaching staff who have been encouraged to rethink their approaches to embedding employability in the undergraduate curriculum, facilitating the enhancement of employability and preparing undergraduate students for careers in sport [3].

The development of work-related knowledge, skills and attributes could be achieved through a variety of approaches at institutional, course and module level [4]. Crucially, it is recognized that employability cannot be taught solely in the classroom [5] and that career development activities should be led by academics yet provide access to industry, professional or vocational input [6]. The Chat Club is an innovative online event series designed to enhance

student learning by facilitating interactions between students and professional football staff from around the world. This initiative was launched as part of the BSc Football Studies course at Solent University to provide students with unique opportunities to engage with industry experts, thereby enriching their educational experience and professional preparation. The emergence of digital learning environments has significantly transformed traditional education models, necessitating the adoption of innovative teaching strategies to meet the evolving needs of students [7].

The integration of technology in education has been widely recognized for its potential to create more flexible, accessible, and engaging learning experiences [8]. Online event series like The Chat Club exemplify this shift, offering a platform for extra-curricular activity, which is similar to the concept of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in the professional world, that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Research has demonstrated that interactive and guided learning approaches, such as those employed by The Chat Club, can significantly enhance student engagement and understanding [9]. These methods encourage active participation, critical thinking, and the practical application of concepts, which are crucial for effective learning [10].

Moreover, the importance of incorporating real-world experiences into academic curricula has been emphasized in numerous studies. For instance, experiential learning theory posits that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience [11]. Learning, as a social process, is influenced by community and cultural factors [12] and this frames The Chat Club as a complex, dynamic environment where socially constructed, collective knowledge is the predominant source of learning, creativity and innovation. By interacting with professionals who share their firsthand insights and experiences, students can contextualize their learning, making it more relevant and impactful. This approach aligns with the constructivist theory of education, which advocates for learning environments where students can construct their understanding through active engagement and reflection [13].

The Chat Club also addresses the need for inclusive and diverse learning opportunities. By featuring speakers from various cultural and professional backgrounds, the series exposes students to a wide range of perspectives and practices within the football industry. This exposure is particularly beneficial in fostering a global mindset and preparing students to operate in an increasingly interconnected world [14]. Additionally, the accessibility of online platforms ensures that these learning opportunities are available to a broader audience, promoting equity in education [8]. This paper aims to evaluate the impact of The Chat Club on BSc Football Studies students at Solent University. Through an analysis of student feedback, guest speaker insights, and relevant literature, the study seeks to understand how this initiative has influenced student engagement, learning outcomes, and professional development. By examining these factors, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on the effectiveness of online CPD events in higher education and their potential to enhance teaching and learning practices.

The Chat Club: Overview of Events and Guest Speakers

Since its inception, The Chat Club has become a cornerstone of the BSc Football Studies program, offering students unparalleled access to industry professionals. The series has hosted 34 events featuring 39 guest speakers from diverse backgrounds within the football industry. These sessions have included prominent figures such as Thomas Gronnemark, Liverpool FC's renowned throw-in coach; Will Still, the manager of RC Lens; and Gustavo Poyet, an ex-professional player and current head coach. Each session aimed to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical insights, providing students with a comprehensive and dynamic learning experience.

The Chat Club featured a diverse array of sessions, each bringing unique insights to the students. Thomas Gronnemark, renowned for his expertise in throw-ins, provided students with in-depth knowledge of the biomechanics and strategies of effective throw-ins, showcasing the integration of sports science with practical coaching. Dr. Diogo Coutinho, an Assistant Professor and assistant coach in Portugal, presented on the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, blending research with practical applications to elucidate the stages of athlete development and their coaching implications [15]. Michael Bridges' session on the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) covered the structured framework used by elite academies for developing young talent, enhancing students' understanding of talent development and performance management. Angel Lopez, Toze Marreco and Robbie Neilson, all seasoned European managers, shared invaluable insights into principles of the game and match preparation, which were particularly beneficial for students aspiring to coaching and managerial roles. Dr. Fabian Otte, First Team Goalkeeper Coach at Liverpool FC and a PhD holder in skill acquisition, discussed the Periodization of Skill Training Framework, emphasizing the importance of structured, research-informed training programs [16]. A round table discussion with Ricardo Correia, Joao Lapa, Ricardo Pereira, Vitor Gouveia, and Remulo Marques provided a comprehensive view of the interdisciplinary collaboration required within a football coaching staff. Will Wilson, founder of the British Football Coaches Network, discussed the creation of his innovative job opportunities platform, offering insights into career development and the significance of networking. Gustavo Poyet's session was particularly inspiring, as he shared his personal journey from professional player to head coach, underscoring the importance of resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning in a football career.

It is the wider context emerging when learning takes place outside the traditional classroom environment, which expands the potential for knowledge transformation [17]. This explains observations of a rise in employability strategies which use the workplace to support learners in connecting different types of knowledge, skill and experience [18]. According to Dewey (2008) [19], experience is central to learning. Dewey also emphasized the processes of participation, collective meaning making and communication, highlighting the importance of a social environment

to the educational process and noting that "a being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account" [20].

The impact of The Chat Club can be benchmarked against existing research on the benefits of experiential learning and industry engagement in higher education. Experiential learning, as posited by Kolb (1984) [11], emphasizes the importance of learning through experience. Drawing inspiration from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, Martin et al. (2010) [21] advocated for the integration of on and off campus learning, identifying stakeholder interaction as an important learning strategy which promoted the transfer of knowledge and experiences from the classroom to the workplace and vice versa. This supported Fleming and Martin's (2007) [22] recommendation for a tripartite partnership whereby students, academic staff and industry-based practitioners must each assume responsibility for their roles and functions in the collaborative learning activity in order to benefit from involvement [22]. The Chat Club embodies this by allowing students to interact directly with professionals, thereby contextualizing their academic learning.

Studies have shown that industry engagement enhances students' understanding of theoretical concepts and their application in professional settings. For example, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) [10] highlights that blended learning environments, which combine online and face-to-face interactions, can significantly enhance the learning experience by providing flexibility and deeper engagement. The Chat Club, through its online format, leverages this blended learning approach effectively. Additionally, the inclusion of diverse speakers aligns with the principles of inclusive education and global competency [14], and it emphasizes the importance of internationalization in higher education, arguing that exposure to diverse perspectives prepares students for global careers. The variety of speakers in The Chat Club reflects this, offering students insights from different cultural and professional contexts.

The positive feedback from both students and faculty underscores the value of The Chat Club. Testimonials have highlighted the benefits of engaging with industry professionals, the practical relevance of the sessions, and the opportunities for networking. One student remarked, "We have a lot of guests coming online and giving lectures, which is amazing as it gives insights into loads of different careers." This sentiment is echoed in the broader literature, where student engagement is linked to improved learning outcomes and professional preparedness [23,24]. Jackson (2016) [24] analyzed the role of the learning programmed in knowledge transfer. She noted that the transformation of knowledge can be facilitated by learning programmed which support learners to find meaning in their classroom-based learning by actively connecting it with new situations and contexts such as the workplace. Furthermore, Jackson (2016) [24] recommended the use of authentic examples, ensuring learners understand the value of knowledge and skills being taught and how they may be utilized in real-world workplace settings. Faculty members have also recognized the initiative's impact on student learning and

course engagement. The Chat Club has been praised for its ability to bring real-world insights into the classroom, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience.

The Chat Club has then successfully bridged the gap between academic learning and professional practice, offering BSc Football Studies students at Solent University a unique and enriching educational experience. By featuring a diverse array of speakers and covering a wide range of topics, the series has provided students with comprehensive insights into the football industry. The alignment of these sessions with experiential learning theories and the positive feedback from participants highlight the significant impact of this innovative initiative.

The New Online Approach: Engaging Learners Through CPD Events

The transition to online CPD events such as The Chat Club has demonstrated significant benefits for student engagement and learning. Utilizing platforms like Microsoft Teams, The Chat Club facilitated broader participation, allowing students to join sessions from various locations and access recorded content for later review. This flexibility is essential in today's digital age, where adaptable learning environments are crucial to meet diverse student needs [25]. Online CPD events provide an inclusive platform that can accommodate various learning styles and schedules, thereby increasing accessibility and participation. Research by Means et al. (2010) [8] indicates that online learning environments can enhance educational outcomes by providing opportunities for students to engage with content at their own pace and revisit material as needed. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) [26] Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, Anderson & Gegg-Harrison (2013) [27] referred to the "Comfort Zone of Proximal Development". They argued that there is a region which lies between a learner's ZPD and their comfort zone in which the taught material "is within their cognitive capabilities, it is presented in a way that is familiar to them and uses an application that is relevant or interesting to them" [27]. They posited that for learning gains to be made, learners must be stretched into their ZPD whilst not losing sight of the familiarity of their comfort zone. Adopted within The Chat Club, the online on-demand approach not only caters to different learning speeds but also allows for a more personalized learning experience, which is particularly beneficial in higher education settings.

The effectiveness of The Chat Club can be further understood through the lens of established educational theories. Kolb's (1984) [11] experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through experience, positing that knowledge is constructed through the transformation of experience. Meanwhile, Vygotsky (1978) [26] emphasized the role of language in enabling learners to effectively engage with their experiences. Drawing on these themes, Wilcox (2023) [28] noted the value that students placed on opportunities to connect with more knowledgeable others, such as practitioners, to learn the language of the industry. She also noted that industry contact was cited by students as the most valuable source of learning in terms of confidence, work-

related experience and networking, skills for employment in the football or sport industry and career guidance and management. By providing students with direct access to interaction with industry professionals and real-world scenarios, The Chat Club embodies the principles of experiential learning, allowing students to engage with the language of the workplace and contextualize theoretical knowledge in work-related settings.

The Chat Club also aligns with the constructivist theory of education, which advocates for learning environments where students can actively construct their understanding through engagement and reflection [13]. Furthermore, Collis and Moonen (2002) [29] stressed the need for a move away from the view that learning is a knowledge acquisition process towards one which is committed to assisting the initiation of students into a professional community. They recommended a contribution-orientated model whereby the interactions and insights that the learner contributes, through their participation in the learning experience, may serve to change the knowledge base of the community as he or she participates. By facilitating interactions with professionals who share their experiences and insights, The Chat Club helps students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, essential components of professional development.

The integration of technology in CPD events has also been highlighted as a key factor in their success. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) [10] discuss the transformative potential of blended learning environments, which combine online and face-to-face interactions to enhance the learning experience. Combining academic learning with real-life workplace settings positions learning as a situated, participatory and socially mediated activity [30,31]. Opportunities to participate in different forms of social practice, such as using different forms of context-specific language in appropriate circumstances, are central to real-world learning and employability enhancement. Although The Chat Club is primarily an online initiative, its interactive format incorporates elements of blended learning by promoting active participation and engagement. The success of The Chat Club highlights the broader implications for the future of higher education. As universities increasingly adopt digital learning strategies, the lessons learned from The Chat Club can inform the development of other online CPD initiatives. By leveraging technology to create flexible, inclusive, and engaging learning environments, educational institutions can better meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

In conclusion, The Chat Club has demonstrated the significant benefits of online CPD events in enhancing student engagement and learning. Through the use of online platforms, these events provide flexible, accessible, and interactive learning experiences that align with contemporary educational theories and practices. The positive feedback from students underscores the value of such initiatives, highlighting their potential to transform higher education and professional development.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

The success of The Chat Club underscores the transformative potential of integrating professional insights with academic content in higher education. Such initiatives provide a holistic learning approach that effectively prepares students for real-world challenges by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Similarly, in an educational context, blending academic learning with professional insights ensures that students not only understand theoretical frameworks but also know how to apply these concepts in practical settings. Holistic learning approaches, as evidenced by The Chat Club, emphasize the importance of experiential learning where students gain direct exposure to industry practices. According to Kolb's (1984) [11] experiential learning theory, knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The Chat Club exemplifies this by providing students with opportunities to learn directly from professionals in the field, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of course material and its real-world applications. This method is supported by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) [10], who argue that blended learning environments, combining online and face-to-face interactions, enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

The Chat Club also plays a crucial role in supporting an inclusive curriculum. By featuring guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, the initiative ensures that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and role models. Research indicates that exposure to diverse role models can positively influence students' perceptions and aspirations, particularly for those from underrepresented groups [32]. Reflective practice is another key component highlighted by The Chat Club. By engaging with content and professionals, students are encouraged to reflect critically on their learning experiences and professional development. Reflective practice involves continuous self-evaluation and adaptation, which are crucial for professional growth and competency [33]. Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004) [34] reported that the support and information received from networking connections can help individuals adapt to situations, thus increasing their confidence, resilience and self-perceived employability. However, Wilcox (2023) [28] found that tensions arise where students lack the impetus to engage with networking opportunities through direct work experience. Findings corroborated Jackson and Tomlinson's (2021) [35] observations which revealed that despite robust levels of agreement for the importance of work experience amongst students in general, the relevance of work experience for making better contact with potential employers received little attention. This highlights the need for educationalists to consider the types of experience that are embedded into a real-world curriculum. Indeed, Bridgstock (2016) [36] noted activities other than work experience, such as those with a CPD emphasis, that build professional networks and bridge relations with significant others, have proven beneficial for developing networking capabilities and are therefore critical for enhancing employability. The Chat Club's format, which includes interactive Q&A sessions and discussions, fosters an environment where students can reflect on their learning, ask questions, and engage in meaningful dialogue with a diverse range of industry experts.

One of the significant contributions of The Chat Club is its ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Traditional education often struggles with making theoretical concepts relatable and applicable to real-world scenarios. By integrating guest speakers who discuss current industry practices, The Chat Club ensures that students can see the direct application of what they learn in their courses. This approach is in line with the constructivist theory of education, which posits that learning is most effective when students can construct new knowledge based on their experiences [13]. The professional insights provided through The Chat Club are instrumental in developing students' competencies. Exposure to industry professionals and their practices helps students understand the expectations and standards of their future careers. According to Eraut (2004) [37], professional learning is significantly enhanced through interactions with more experienced practitioners. The Chat Club facilitates this by providing a platform where students can learn from seasoned professionals, thereby enhancing their readiness for the job market.

The success of The Chat Club has broader implications for the future of educational practices in higher education. It demonstrates that incorporating professional insights into the curriculum can significantly enhance the quality of education. This model can be adapted across various disciplines to provide students with a more integrated and comprehensive learning experience. Furthermore, the use of online platforms for CPD events can increase accessibility and participation, making high-quality education available to a broader audience. In conclusion, The Chat Club's innovative approach to blending professional insights with academic content provides a powerful model for transforming higher education. By promoting a holistic learning approach, supporting an inclusive curriculum, encouraging reflective practice, and bridging the gap between theory and practice, The Chat Club enhances student engagement and prepares them for real-world challenges. The initiative's success underscores the potential for similar programs to improve educational outcomes and foster a more inclusive and competent global workforce.

The Future of Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The Chat Club model presents a viable framework for future educational initiatives, demonstrating that online CPD events can effectively complement traditional teaching methods by offering flexibility and enhanced engagement. The success of The Chat Club highlights the potential for integrating professional insights into academic curricula to create more dynamic and engaging learning experiences. However, several challenges must be addressed to optimize these events and fully realize their potential in higher education. The integration of online CPD events like The Chat Club into traditional educational frameworks offers numerous opportunities for enhancing the learning experience. Research indicates that blended learning environments, which combine online and face-to-face instruction, can improve student outcomes by providing a more flexible and accessible learning model [10]. This approach allows students to engage with course material at

their own pace and revisit recorded sessions, thus accommodating different learning styles and schedules [8].

Ensuring consistent participation and engagement in online CPD events is a critical challenge. Studies have shown that student engagement is a key predictor of academic success and satisfaction in online learning environments [38,39] identified the increasing emphasis that students placed on the accumulation of experience and achievements gained outside the formal learning of their degree course. However, Wilcox (2023) [28] found that despite encouragement from academic tutors, several students viewed their studies as a priority, even at the expense of other employability enhancement opportunities outside of the formal curriculum. Research has shown that students perceive the idea of balancing study with extra-curricular engagements designed to support transition into the workplace as a challenging task [3]. Furthermore, Jackson and Tomlinson (2021) [35] attributed a low uptake in extra-curricular opportunities to students' failure to make the connection with issues of employability and future career development. Conversely, work-related learning opportunities have been perceived by students in a positive light when they are explicitly tied to their studies [40]. Accordingly, the notion of experience appeared to come hand in hand with conceptions related to the possession of knowledge, based on Eisner's (2002) [41] description of practical reasoning as a facet of knowledge which is developed through experience and applied to local contexts. The importance of the tutors' role in supporting students to acknowledge, engage with and, consequently, benefit from work experience opportunities presented alongside their studies cannot be understated. Future research should explore strategies such as effective scheduling and targeted marketing to increase attendance. For instance, finding optimal times for live sessions that accommodate students' schedules can enhance participation. Additionally, promoting the benefits of these events through various channels can raise awareness and interest.

Technological barriers, including access to reliable internet and appropriate devices, can impede the effectiveness of online CPD events. Research by Martin et al. (2020) [42] highlights the importance of providing technical support and resources to ensure all students can participate fully. Universities must invest in robust IT infrastructure and offer training sessions to help students and staff navigate online platforms effectively. The integration of feedback mechanisms is crucial for the continuous improvement of online CPD events. Regular feedback from students and guest speakers can provide valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement of these sessions. According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) [43], formative feedback helps students understand their progress and identify areas where they need to improve. Implementing structured feedback forms and surveys can help organizers refine the content and delivery of future events.

The success of The Chat Club suggests that incorporating professional insights and real-world experiences into the curriculum can significantly enhance educational outcomes. This approach aligns with the constructivist theory of education,

which posits that learners construct knowledge through active engagement and interaction with their environment [13]. Language enables individuals to make sense of the world and enables learners to collaborate in socially complex activities [44,28] revealed that whilst students perceived practitioners as highly knowledgeable and there was a desire to learn "in collaboration with more capable peers" [26], a feeling of disconnect with the language used by practitioners resulted in a reluctance by students to actively engage explained that students should be guided through unfamiliar discourses so that they are better equipped to make meaning from their experiences [45-47]. By integrating guest speakers and industry professionals into the curriculum, educators can provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of their field and better prepare them for their future careers.

Future research should focus on identifying best practices for integrating online CPD events into higher education. This includes exploring the optimal balance between online and face-to-face interactions, effective methods for engaging students, and strategies for overcoming technological barriers. Additionally, research should investigate the long-term impact of these events on student learning outcomes and career development. The Chat Club model provides a promising framework for future educational initiatives, demonstrating the potential of online CPD events to enhance traditional teaching methods. By addressing challenges such as participation, technological barriers, and feedback integration, educators can optimize these events and maximize their impact. The lessons learned from The Chat Club can inform the development of similar initiatives across various disciplines, contributing to the evolution of higher education and better preparing students for the demands of the modern workforce.

Conclusion

The Chat Club has significantly impacted the education of BSc Football Studies students at Solent University by providing unique opportunities for engagement with industry professionals. This initiative has demonstrated the potential of online CPD events to enhance learning, foster professional development, and promote an inclusive educational environment. By integrating professional insights with academic content, The Chat Club has created a holistic learning approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, preparing students for real-world challenges. The success of The Chat Club illustrates the transformative potential of such initiatives in higher education. It has showcased how online platforms like Microsoft Teams can facilitate broader participation, providing flexibility and accessibility that cater to diverse student needs. Student testimonials and positive feedback underscore the value of these events, highlighting their role in offering practical insights, networking opportunities, and a deeper understanding of industry practices. This aligns with existing research on the benefits of interactive and contextually relevant CPD activities in enhancing student motivation and learning outcomes.

The Chat Club also supports an inclusive curriculum by featuring diverse role models and addressing the needs of all students, fostering an equitable learning environment essential for developing a global and diverse student body. The initiative's emphasis on reflective practice encourages students to engage critically with content and develop their professional competencies, aligning with educational theories that advocate for experiential and constructivist learning approaches. Furthermore, The Chat Club's success points to the broader implications for the future of higher education. It suggests that similar online CPD events can effectively complement traditional teaching methods, offering a blended learning model that enhances engagement and learning outcomes. However, to optimize these events, challenges such as ensuring consistent participation, managing technological barriers, and integrating effective feedback mechanisms must be addressed. Future research should explore strategies to overcome these challenges and further refine the delivery and impact of online CPD initiatives.

In summary, The Chat Club has proven to be a valuable educational tool, significantly enhancing the learning experience for BSc Football Studies students. By continuing to innovate and adapt, similar programs can contribute to the evolution of higher education, better preparing students for successful careers in their chosen fields. The insights gained from The Chat Club's implementation can inform the development of future educational initiatives, ensuring that higher education remains responsive to the needs of its students and the demands of the modern workforce.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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