



Generic Skills for Sustainable Development

Harshvardhan Singh

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Panjab University,
Chandigarh

Dr. Manju Gera

Assistant Professor, USOL, Panjab University, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

The growing emphasis on generic skills in higher education has several sources. One is the increasing evidence of demand from business and employer organizations for graduates to possess generic skills. There are also various economic, technological and educational arguments that have brought generic skills to wider attention. Previous research exploring the development of generic skills has demonstrated in many instances the need for learning settings that focus on process and student-centered activities rather than subject content. The deliberate design of learning and teaching strategies to advance these sorts of relational generic attributes is arguably just as significant in university life as is the deliberate design of the substantive discipline or field-based studies which are the core of the graduate's clinical or technical or professional practice. Such strategies should be embedded in the substantive course which leads to the very practice of the capabilities as these find expression through employment. In this way, the 'employability gap' could be closed without compromising the integrity of substantive university studies. The present paper elucidates the importance of Generic –Skills in attainment of sustainable development. It emphasise on pedagogical processes that leads to Generic- Skills development and closing the Employability Gap.

KEYWORDS

Generic-Skills, Sustainable Development, Employability-Gap

Introduction

Generic skills equip one to organize, adapt, and strategically apply specific skills in new situations and circumstances. Generic skills also enable to generate new skills that help to succeed in novel situations, manage and adapt to change and to flourish by creating what matters, even in the face of adversity. They are important today because work and life are in flux. Both are getting more complex, both require flexibility, initiative, creativity, emotional mastery and the ability to take on many different tasks and to learn from one's doing and one's experience. The growing emphasis on generic skills in higher education has several sources. One is the increasing evidence of demand from business and employer organizations for graduates to possess generic skills. There are also various economic, technological and educational arguments that have brought generic skills to wider attention. The contemporary focus on generic skills is really part of a bigger, as yet unresolved, debate about the purpose of university education and how to develop well-educated persons who are both employable and capable of contributing to civil society (Kemmis, 1998).

Sustainable Development and Generic Skills

• **Demand for generic skills from employers:** Generic skills are important for employability. The Kirby Report (2000) discusses employability in the context of changing socio-economic and work conditions. Education and training are the main instruments available to governments and the community to prepare individuals for a rapidly- changing, increasingly demanding world of work, and to improve their employability. An individual's employability depends on several factors. It involves self-belief and an ability to secure and retain employment. It also means being able to improve his or her productivity and income-earning prospects. This often requires competing effectively in the job market and being able to move between occupations if necessary. It requires 'learning to learn' for new job opportunities in an advanced knowledge, communications and technologies society.

• **Economic Considerations for Generic Skills:** The economic considerations that have drawn attention to generic skills stem largely from the observation that the nature of

work has both changed and continues to change, particularly with the continuing spread of microelectronic technology. As well, there is a shift to a service economy where information and social skills are increasingly important. These changes are so fundamental, that workers now require different sorts of attributes. Proficiency in the broad range of generic skills is the main basic equipment of the new worker. Even where the term "knowledge worker" is used, suggesting that the new workplace involves continuous knowledge creation, generic skills are the core contributors to these work activities. Rapid changes in the nature of work are also leading to the concept of a 'portfolio career' and a growing interest in lifelong learning. These rapid and accelerating changes have placed pressure on the front-end approach to vocational and professional education. This reflected, for instance, in growing dissatisfaction with courses for professions (Hager, 1996). More and more, a formal two, three or four year courses at the start of a career whether in the vocational or higher education sector, is seen merely as the necessary foundation for the early years practice, rather than as the sufficient basis for a lifelong learning and attributes that are commonly taken to characterize lifelong learning (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary 1994) are heavily reliant on a range of generic skills.

• **Generic skills by education providers:** While business and employers are calling for more emphasis on generic skills, so too are educational providers. While this interest is stimulated partly by a desire to appeal to business and employers in an era of increasing competition and accountability, these are no the only relevant factors. There is increased awareness that well-founded sets of generic skills have the potential to deliver several educational advantages to course providers whether vocational and / or educational in emphasis. These advantages are Course Development, Course delivery and assessment, Quality assurance. In the area of course development, the advantages offered by a sound set of generic skills are multiple. They add a further dimension to discipline – specific discourse by providing the basis for consistent terminology for describing course outcomes. The common lack of such consistency, particularly in the higher education sector, means there is no agreed reference point when, for example, staff attempt to develop trans-disciplinary courses. Generic skills are, typical-

ly, significant components of initiatives to improve teaching and learning (Moy, 1999). Such initiatives take many forms and have diverse aims. But whether they seek to encourage deeper learning, to make learners more reflective about their learning or to develop more self – directed learners, they characteristically require learners to deploy some combination of generic skills of they are to be successful. A good example is a recent interest in how courses can foster lifelong learning capacities. A set of generic skill is fundamental to enhancing such learning (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary 1994). A common theme for teaching and learning of generic skills is that success depends crucially on them bring made explicit for students. Leaving them implicit, as they are in many traditional courses, does little to encourage learning and development.

• Pedagogical Processes for Generic Skill Development

Previous research exploring the development of generic skills has demonstrated in many instances the need for learning settings that focus on process and student-centered activities rather than subject content (Biggs, 1999; Candy, Crebert, G., & O'Leary, 1994; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992). The literature in this area suggests the need for meaningful learner activities. For example, the need for learning environments that use a student-centered process approach with dialogue, feedback, reflection, and task-oriented activities; and to be situated in a contextual environment as in a "real-world activity" (Laurillard, 1993). In line with constructivist learning theories that focus on learning process rather than content, more and more learning settings are beginning to emphasize the role of the learner in creating their own meaning in different learning situations by actively engaging with the content through accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1969) or through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). The development of generic skills as a component of the curricular activity is seen to be promoted through learning environments that promote deep learning. Deep learning is an outcome frequently cited of learning settings that focus on processes as distinct from products (Ramsden, 1992). Driscoll (1994) argues that five conditions of learning are needed to provide an appropriate emphasis on the process of learning, as well as the product learning. These are:

- Complex, rich learning environments that incorporate authentic activity.
- Multiple juxtapositions of instructional content i.e. examining the same material from multiple perspectives
- Social negotiation as an integral part of learning
- Emphasis on student-centered instruction, and
- Nurturance of reflexivity

Generic Skills: Better Learning and Employability

Bennett, Dunne and Carre (1999) have taken issue with the assumption that the outcomes will be beneficial; however, there are sound educational arguments for focusing on Generic Skills are also the ones that lead to good learning outcomes. Thus, by embedding the development of generic skills in courses one can improve learning overall. The emphasis here is on how people learn best rather than on generic skills themselves. Corte (1996) has a useful set of features of powerful learning environments. They:

- Have a good balance between discovery learning and personal exploration, on the one hand, and systematic instruction and guidance, on the other.
- Requires students to progressively increase their share of self-regulation at the expense of external regulation.
- Provide opportunities to use a rich array of resources and for social interaction and collaboration.
- Allow for the flexible adaption of the instructional support to accommodate individual differences and stages of learning.
- Facilitate the acquisition of general learning and thinking skills throughout the curriculum.

Research on generic skills teaching and learning methods indicates that they are best developed by active approaches (Moy,

1999). Thus, there is a strong and recurrent link between the development of generic skills by learners and teaching and learning methods that exhibit such features as:

- Adult learning principles.
- Holistic approaches to learning.
- Problem-based learning
- Lifelong learning skills
- Learning how, why and exploring what if not just learning received facts
- Learner reflection, evaluation and articulation on learning experiences as a critical aspect of the learning process.
- Active, learner-centred approaches in which integrated thinking and action occurs on tasks that are relevant and meaningful to learners.
- The teacher assuming multiple roles, such as mentor, coach, facilitator, evaluator, that include demonstrating/modelling the generic skills to learners.

Closing the 'Employability' Gap

Generic attributes have always made the difference between good and bad, or good and better employee. Currently, educational institutions are seeking to assist students to maximize these attributes. A first step is to understand how to reflect the influence of context, the benefits of transferability and overall capability in course design. Bowden (1999) lists the following example of graduate attributes. Graduates will have

- A commitment to learning from every new situation they encounter and the ability to fulfil that commitment.
- The capability to make context-sensitive judgments areas of communication, teamwork, creativity, critical analysis, professional and personal responsibility, leadership, information literacy, IT literacy, international orientation and environmental awareness, among others. This capability involves the judgment to choose appropriate behaviour in varying professional and social contexts.
- A knowledge capability which enables them to deal effectively with each new situation in their professional or social lives.

The deliberate design of learning and teaching strategies to advance these sorts of relational generic attributes is arguably just as significant in university life as is the deliberate design of the substantive discipline or field-based studies which are the core of the graduate's clinical or technical or professional practice. Such strategies should be embedded in the substantive course which leads to the very practice of the capabilities as these find expression through employment. In this way, the 'employability gap' could be closed without compromising the integrity of substantive university studies. Thus, it would be helpful for understanding these various initiatives to locate them in a suitable classification framework.

Conclusion

The focus on generic skills may be a recent phenomenon, however, in institutional terms generic skills have always been inherent to the good educational practice. Indeed what makes generic skills valuable to a student is not only whether they translate to a workplace i.e. often sometime in the future, but whether they relate to the next level of learning they undertake often quite immediately. Thus, generic skills are relevant throughout life and are frequently used implicitly if not explicitly, to distinguish between potential students at different stages in their learning pathways and sustainable development of youth.

REFERENCES

1. Bennett, N., Dunne, E., & Carre, C. (1999). Patterns of core and generic skill provision in higher education. *Higher Education*, 37, 71-93 | 2. Biggs, J. (1999). Teaching for quality learning at university. Buckingham: Open University Press | 3. Bowden, J. (1999). Foreword in RMIT Graduate Attributes: Information Kit. Retrieved on 24th February, 2015 from www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv7241y. | 4. Candy, P., Crebert, G., & O'Leary, J. (1994). Developing lifelong learners through undergraduate education. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service. | 5. Corte, E. (1996) *New Perspectives of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. In A. Burgen, (Ed.), *Goals and Purposes of Higher Education in the 21st Century* (pp.112-132) London: Jessica Kingsley. | 6. Driscoll, M. P. (1994) *Psychology of learning for instruction*. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon | 7. Gibbs, G. (1992). Improving the quality of student learning. Plymouth: Technical and Educational Services Ltd. | 8. Hager, P. (1996) *Professional Practice in Education: Research Issues*. *Australian Journal of Education*, 40(3), 235 – 247 | 9. Kemmis, S. (1998). System and life world, and the conditions of learning in late modernity. *Curriculum Studies*, 6 (3), 269-305. | 10. Kirby Report (2000). A ministerial review of Post-Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria: Final Report. Melbourne: DEET | 11. Laurillard, D. (1993) *Rethinking University teaching. A Framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge | 12. Moy, J. (1999) *The impact of Generic Competencies on Workplace Performance*. Retrieved on 23rd April, 2015 from ro.ecu.edu.au/CGI/viewcontent.cgi?article=7209&context=ecuworksy | 13. Piaget, J. (1969). *Science of Education and the psychology of the child*. Newyork: Viking | 14. Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education*. London & New York: Routledge. | 15. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. |