Developing Generic Skills through Majors and Programs

Introduction

Actively teaching and assessing generic skills such as group work and oral presentations are sometimes seen by academic staff within Arts faculties as contentious and even inappropriate. Where programs have a direct alignment with particular professional or employment opportunities, there is a clearer rationale for enhancing specific skills. However, as recognised by the University's Graduate Attributes, all programs have an obligation to actively and systematically develop generic skills.

In years past, Arts graduates were highly sought after by employers not because of their discipline-specific knowledge but because of their much valued generic skills. In recent years, greater competition for the available jobs has been fuelled by significant increases in the numbers of university graduates, as well as the introduction of applied arts degrees with specific career destinations and a greater emphasis on producing 'work-ready' graduates. These changes have eroded many of the employment possibilities for graduates of the more traditional Arts degrees.

Traditional Arts degrees have the same potential as always to provide graduates with greatly valued employment-related skills, but in the current highly-competitive demand-driven environment there needs to be a clearer curriculum focus, greater transparency and increased promotion of employment outcomes. Indeed, it could be argued that the need to re-establish awareness of the employment potential of traditional Arts degrees provides an even stronger case for explicitly teaching and assessing generic skills than in the more vocationally oriented awards.

Designing the Curriculum for Generic Skill Development

Teaching generic skills is not limited to particular courses, or to staff with specialised expertise; it is the task of every course and the business of every lecturer. Although some courses may be more obviously inclined to particular skills, all courses can and must make a contribution to the overall profile of Graduate Attributes.

Determine the end point.

For all generic skills it is critical to determine in some detail what students are ultimately expected to achieve, and how they will demonstrate that achievement at the end of their major/program. Typically, the summative assessment of generic skills will be included in assessment of final year courses in the major/program, probably through a capstone course. In identifying the scope of this final year outcome it is critical to understand that the attainment required is the level necessary to *begin* professional practice; once in employment, graduates would be expected to continue the development of these skills. In order to determine the expectation of skill level for commencing employment it would be valuable to engage with employers and other stakeholders.

Identify the stages in the development of the skill.

Once you have identified the final expectation of a skill, you need to specify the various components and their progression across the major/program. This is known as 'back-mapping' and includes determining the courses in which the various aspects will be taught, practised and assessed. Designing a major/program so that there is progressive development of skills requires the collaboration of staff teaching across the constituent courses.

Ensure the skills are included in the course learning outcomes, actively taught and assessed.

The developmental sequence for each of the generic skills across the major/program should be clear in the course learning outcomes. For each course there needs to be constructive alignment: consistency among the course learning outcomes, the assessment, and the teaching and learning arrangements. That is, the skills specified in the course learning outcomes should be assessed and explicitly taught.

Just being present in a group context does not constitute group work. Although assigning marks for 'participation' may encourage attendance and result in many beneficial learning, it does not provide the structured, developmental approach that is required to teach and practise the broad range of group work skills

Although it is not necessary or even desirable to assess every skill or sub-skill every time they are part of the student learning experience, if they are included in the course learning outcomes they must be assessed. Not to do so means that there is no objective basis for concluding that students have met the course learning outcomes. Giving students multiple opportunities to practise skills in tutorials or to use presentation technologies before they are assessed is an important feature of teaching group work.

Let students know what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Tell students why generic skills are part of the curriculum and how they will make them more employable. Provide explicit information at the beginning of their major/program about the increasing development of skills over the years and how they will be expected to demonstrate that they have achieved the required skills. Giving students these reference points helps them to monitor their own skill development and will help them to clearly articulate what they know and can do.

Openly promote the way specific courses develop particular Graduate Attributes along with the discipline content so that students are informed about the ways they can select courses to build degrees with a broad range of outcomes.